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BATTLE ROYALE
WHY EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS
TOTAL WAR WARHAMMER II
INSIDE ONE OF THE MOST AMBITIOUS STRATEGY GAMES EVER MADE
EXOTIC TIER EXCLUSIVE
DESTINY 2
BUNGIE TELLS US HOW THE FANS HELPED FIND THE TRUE LIGHT OF ITS GENERATION-DEFINING SHOOTER
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The creator of Battle Chasers reflects on his career
THE MAKING OF FINAL FANTASY XII
Join us behind the scenes with the original developers of this RPG classic
Future
ISSUE 188

What is the magic formula that turns a development studio, a business that is made up of an assortment of faceless developers, artists, writers, testers and more, into an institution with its own personality? There are only a handful of collectives that carry this trait and I would imagine that this very question is something that many studio heads ponder and strive to achieve. Bungie is one such studio.

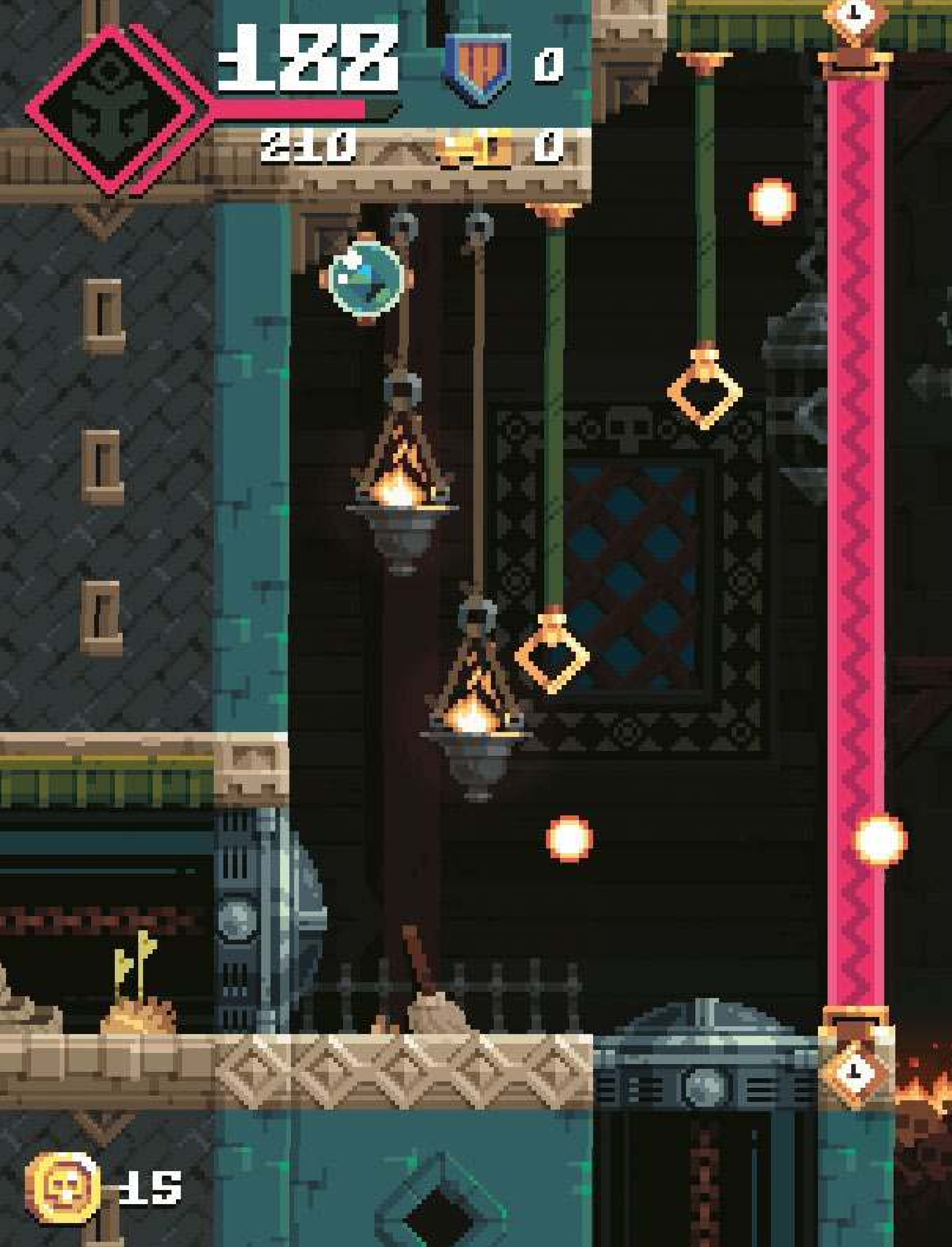
When I think of Bungie I have a number of instant feelings and associations. I think about the famous combat loop philosophy, about grand, open battles, spectacle and characters with heart. I think about the insanity and hilarity of online gaming. I think about the oddness of how the sincerity of single-player and the openness of multiplayer complement each other.

I think of Bungie as a single entity that stands for something and that's probably why I have so much more faith in it to deliver on the promise of *Destiny* than I would if the game had been developed by most other triple-A studios. There's a flavour to a good Bungie shooter that has managed to remain consistent over all of these years and that's just one of the reasons why it's managed to hold onto its own distinct fanbase in that time. It was exciting to see where it plans on taking *Destiny* next, as you find out in this issue.



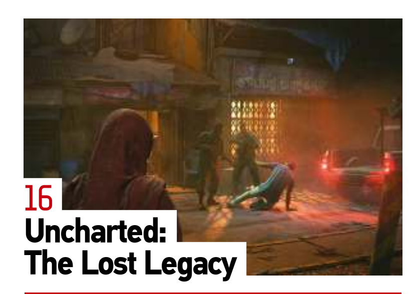
Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR


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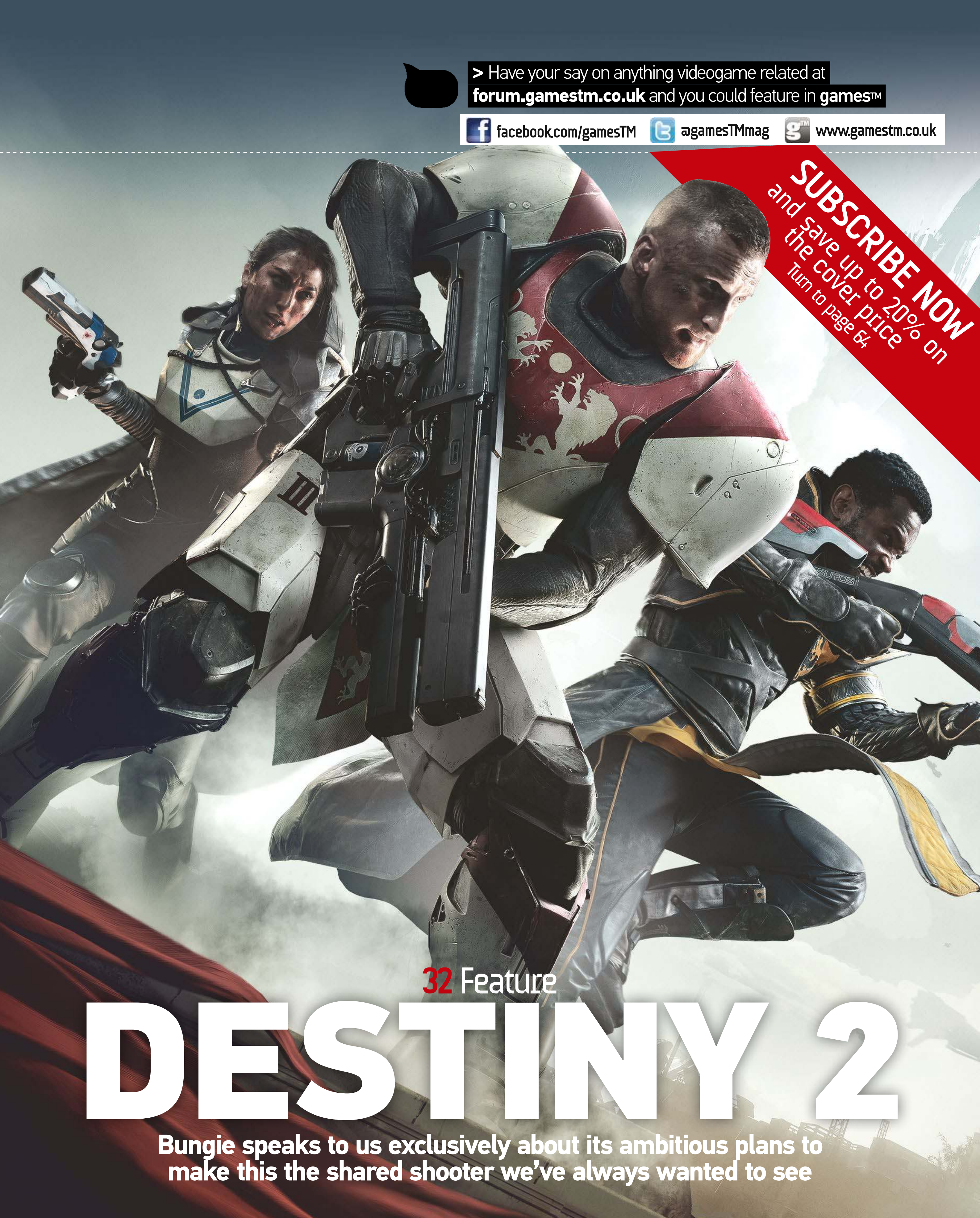


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RETRO

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32 Feature

DESTINY 2

Bungie speaks to us exclusively about its ambitious plans to make this the shared shooter we've always wanted to see

Discuss

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BUILDING WITH BUDDIES

How Fortnite is leading Epic's new era

→ As Fortnite emerges from months of closed beta, we find out why it is the flagship release for the remodelled developer of Gears Of War

"Everything from how we work with our community to how we patch our games, *Fortnite* really was the prototype of that shift inside the organisation to be able to have closer contact with our players." So says Epic creative director and *Fortnite* creative lead Darren Sugg, as the developer's base-building and horde-surviving multiplayer experience steps back into the light after months of silence. This *Horde* mode meets *Minecraft*-ish third-person shooter was one of the first titles Epic announced as it made the decision to move away from boxed games and towards a digitally focused, multiplayer future. On the horizon are the already very successful *Paragon* and the long-awaited *Unreal Tournament*, but this is where it began.

"I think we took a lot from even how we engaged with the community from the early days of *Fortnite* and some of the things we wanted to refine," says Sugg. "And that's what got pushed into the *Paragon* experience when that got released. Each thing that Epic has been doing has been a lesson built on preceding decisions across the company."



Above The whole game is set in a world where the majority of the planet's population has vanished. And from what we understand, that doesn't just mean dead or infected; it means actually disappeared, or at least that's what your heroes know.

So while the third-person zombie survival shooter doesn't appear to have much in common with Epic's super-polished MOBA or its retooled and revived FPS multiplayer title, each is attempting what Sugg calls "live game development", keeping the studio's progress open to fans.

"On top of that we wanted to self-publish, so we had to build an entire publishing organisation around that to support us," adds Sugg. "We were like, 'We just make the game and everything works, right?' And it turns out you need support staff and community and customer service and localisation, all things that we as an organisation have to now handle. So, that was a pretty significant shift over the last couple of years to make that leap. It's been pretty awesome to do that and *Fortnite* was the thing that we used to charge through all of those gates."

DATA STREAM → AFTER 11 YEARS THE PRODUCTION OF THE PS3 CONSOLE IN JAPAN HAS ENDED

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Inset You can specialise in a number of different classes in the game, which doesn't restrict you from performing any of the available tasks, but it will make you slightly better at some than others.

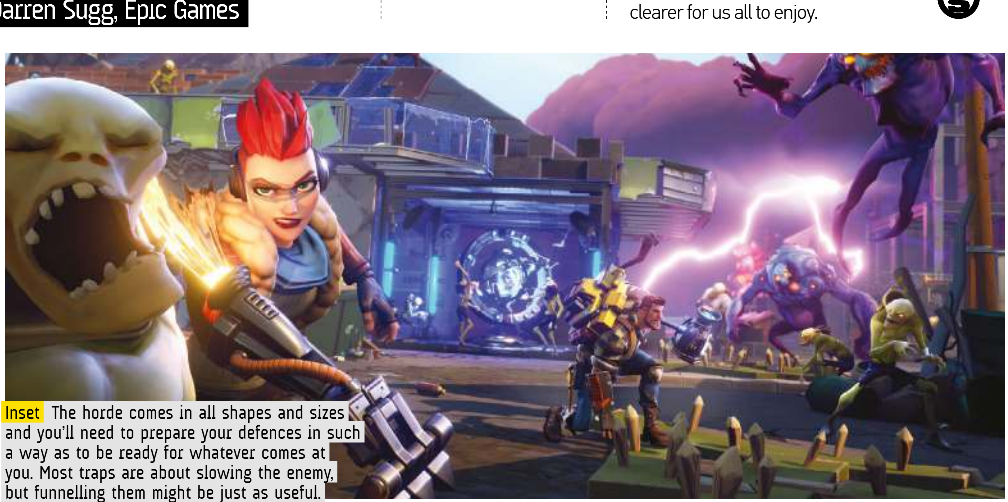
It's been a long road for this game, but now Epic has some big news it can share more widely. "*Fortnite*'s been running in online tests for the last 14 months or so and we got to learn a lot from our players and iterate through the game design and just generally test all the things that we've been working on," Sugg reveals. "In our latest transformation we've iterated to the point now where we have a good ten-foot experience [meaning ten feet away from the screen, like on a TV for example], so we'll be able to publish on Xbox One, PS4, PC and Mac. Now people can enjoy the game on a ten-foot experience with a controller."

So we'll get to experience Epic's latest on home consoles as well as home computers, which is great news. But 14 months of closed beta had us thinking the game had gone completely dark. Perhaps it simply felt that way compared to how betas are generally run, as according to Sugg this wasn't about publicity, but about genuinely making the game better. "Most of my background is in online games so for me specifically, I've been in some pretty lengthy beta periods where you're tuning with the audience on a beta server. I think that the difference for us is that we just decided we're going to release the game to a group of guys and just go without too much fanfare, making a big deal out of the closed beta. In the past that was much more a function of marketing."

Above Yeah, that's a robot bear. Not much more we care to add about that, except it looks pretty mean.

So what's changed for *Fortnite* in that time? The art style remains unchanged since its announcement, although the original pitch based on a game-jam experiment was much grittier and in keeping with Epic's classic aesthetic. We're still working with a group of friends to gather resources and build a fortress against an incoming horde of enemies. But some things did evolve, particularly on the server management side of things. "There was a time in the beginning of the game where the world itself worked more like *Minecraft* where there was an originating host for our game world. If you were to own that world I would enter into your world and all of the items and equipment and everything only lived on your world." Now things are going to be managed centrally so you can always access your gear. "We had a fairly radical change there to create persistent gear and persistent advancement in the game. That did not exist at the beginning of that sequence," Sugg sums up. And now the fruits of that labour are becoming clearer for us all to enjoy.

> "Fortnite's been running in online tests for the last 14 months or so and we got to learn a lot from our players and iterate through the game design"
>
> Darren Sugg, Epic Games


Inset The horde comes in all shapes and sizes and you'll need to prepare your defences in such a way as to be ready for whatever comes at you. Most traps are about slowing the enemy, but funnelling them might be just as useful.



Epic's line-up

The games you can expect and give feedback on now

FORTNITE

A co-operative survival third-person shooter revolving around base-building, looting and sharing the experience with friends. Its light-hearted take on a post-apocalyptic event is rather at odds with Epic's traditional style, but that's very deliberate.



PARAGON

Epic's MOBA has been in open beta since August 2016 and keeps adding new characters and features to its already robust experience. It's got all of the polish and magic you would expect from an Unreal Engine-driven title and is a game to watch.



UNREAL TOURNAMENT

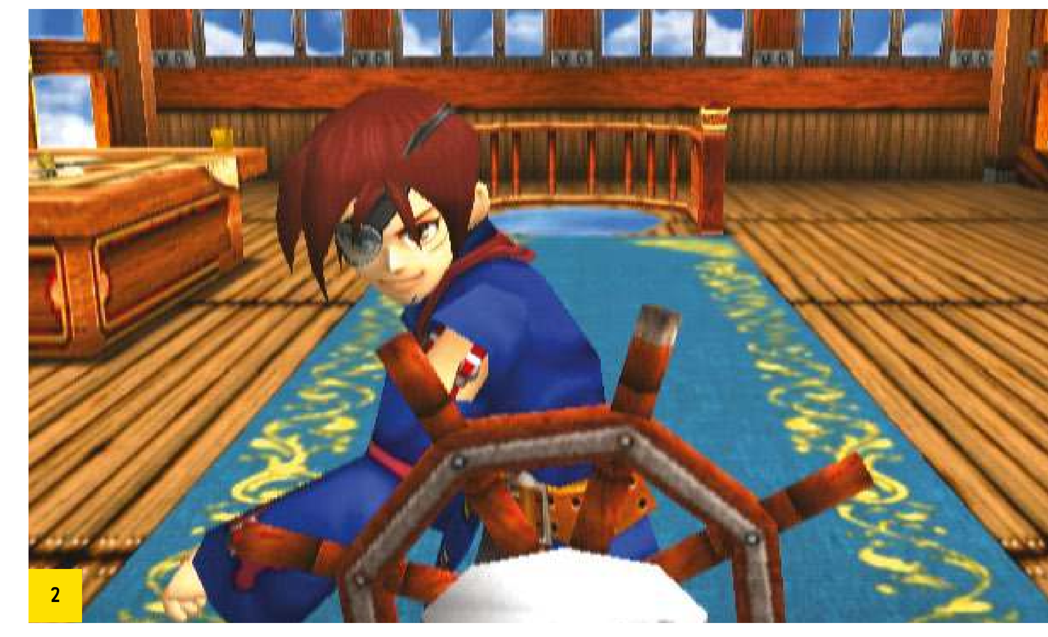
This is going to be the ninth iteration of *Unreal Tournament* to come our way and it's been gradually building with some direct assistance from the community as a crowdsourced game. Players have actually been designing and concepting assets for the final release.



 FAR CRY 5 HAS BEEN ANNOUNCED WITH A FOCUS ON RELIGIOUS EXTREMISTS IN THE UNITED STATES 



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CONSOLE YOURSELF

The Great Sega Revival

→ Which pages of its back catalogue should Sega have bookmarked?

After five years of consolidation around some core properties in the console and PC market, Sega has declared that it is once again ready to take some creative risks. The company has recently unveiled a new strategy for the gaming market – it will be aiming for bigger hits rather than medium-scale successes, and looking to develop new IPs and utilise licensed external properties to join existing hits.

The part that has excited fans the most is the mention of the company's past properties being revived as part of this new drive for big hits. Though the company hasn't specified what games it's looking to bring back (and with the strategy document titled 'Road To 2020' it's going to be a while before we see them), we've got our own thoughts on the games that Sega should be looking to revive as a matter of priority.

Golden Axe

1 **Subtlety was never something that *Golden Axe* troubled itself with – you hit various muscular beings until they died, then walked to the right and hit some more things.** Occasionally, you'd stop to kick a dwarf in order to make it drop a magic potion or some meat. That might not sound like a formula ripe for a comeback, and it's hard to forget that 2008's *Golden Axe: Beast Rider* was a notable bust.

However, what made *Golden Axe*'s hack-and-slash gameplay so appealing was the fact that you got to carve up Death Adder's forces with a friend. With the resurgence of local multiplayer in recent times as well as the popularity of games like *Dynasty Warriors*, we can't help but imagine how much fun it would be to charge into massive battles with a friend or three accompanying us, preferably riding the iconic Chicken Leg.

Skies Of Arcadia

2 **In a way, it's amazing that the Dreamcast's best RPG hasn't yet been revived in some fashion.** It's clear that the developers retain a great deal of fondness for the game, as evidenced by the appearance of Vyse and Aika in *Valkyria Chronicles*. What's more, the Rogue's Landing track in *Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed* gave us a tantalising glimpse at how terrific the series could look with the benefit of modern technology.

The original developers have been preoccupied with the *Valkyria Chronicles* series in recent years, and its popularity in Japan suggests that they'll continue to be involved with that franchise. But the original team doesn't necessarily need to take the project – after all, with Atlus now owned by Sega, there's a wealth of RPG development talent for the company to draw upon.

DATA STREAM → BIOWARE HAS REPORTEDLY PUT THE MASS EFFECT SERIES ON HOLD AFTER ANDROMEDA





Jet Set Radio

3 **If you need a reminder of how long it's been since *Jet Set Radio Future*, the game turned 15 years old earlier this year.** It was released within a few months of the Xbox launch, when Microsoft was still considered an unproven newcomer to the console market. Clearly much has changed since then, yet fan desire for a *Jet Set Radio* sequel has never really abated. It's easy to see why – the series' aesthetic is still distinctive today, and it's fun to be a rebel.

What's interesting is that Sega would be free to explore new designs with a third *Jet Set Radio*, as the first two games were actually rather dissimilar. The Dreamcast original was an arcade-inspired affair with small stages, time limits and constant enemy presence, whereas the Xbox sequel pushed exploration and platforming to the forefront. Online turf wars between graffiti gangs? We can dream…

Alpha Protocol

4 **Sega has often been a company that championed some pretty ambitious titles, and *Alpha Protocol* was definitely one of them.** The espionage-themed RPG had intricate dialogue and character progression systems, and its relatively short but elaborately-told plot is well worth seeing through to the end. However, the game was plagued with technical issues that dragged down aspects of the design.

Despite failing to make a huge market impression, time has been kind to *Alpha Protocol*. Those who revisit the game are generally pleased with the experience some seven years on, retrospectives have focused on its praiseworthy qualities, and Obsidian has even expressed a desire to try a sequel. Although a sequel was ruled out in the immediate aftermath of the original, with an adequate development time and budget, a follow-up that corrects the faults of the original game could turn out to be truly special.

Bayonetta

5 **If you're not a fan, it'd be easy to argue that *Bayonetta* has had enough chances already.** The original games sold solidly but not spectacularly, the sequel failed to live up to even that standard of commercial performance (although as a Wii U exclusive, it was always going to struggle), and the original game has just been ported to PC.

But *Bayonetta* keeps coming back, and it's precisely *because* of this irrepressible nature that we'd be keen to see the titular witch given another chance at the big time. It's true that PlatinumGames' action titles could suit a wide range of characters well, but *Bayonetta* is the kind of female power fantasy that gaming all too often lacks – and one that helped the original game to stand out from a pack that includes *Vanquish* and *MadWorld*, which is quite an achievement. Letting her disappear would be a loss to gaming.







STREAMING GETS INVENTIVE

You should be watching...

→ Twitch has become a bastion of creativity. Here are some channels to keep your eye on



SHERIFFELI

Known for his stern demeanour, this former police officer has thrown in his real-life police badge in favour of cleaning up the streets of Los Santos in *GTA Online*. SheriffEli's accurate role-play of an LSPD peacekeeper is as endearing to watch as it is educational – the streamer's five-year, real-life experience helps him to stay unwaveringly in character as Sheriff Eli and educate his viewers on proper police procedure. A new streamer on Twitch, SheriffEli's rise in popularity has been meteoric thanks to the support offered from other *GTA Online* streamers, such as Proxy.





LOBOSJR

As if Soulsborne games weren't challenging enough, LobosJr imposes almost masochistic challenges – such as use-what-you-see or one-HP builds – upon himself in order to ramp up the difficulty of these games even further. LobosJr isn't a new Twitch streamer; his consistently entertaining and genuinely fascinating challenges have earned him a loyal and healthy following and established him as one of Twitch's most innovative content-makers. As an interesting aside, LobosJr actually worked in the games industry prior to becoming a full-time streamer in BioWare's Quality Assurance department.





DAIGOTHEBEASTV

Street Fighter virtuoso Daigo Umehara was appointed Twitch 'Global Ambassador' in June 2016. In his new role, the professional gamer has been promoting the streaming service across the world, and, of course, streaming content of his own. Umehara's channel hosts pro matchups and the occasional 'lecture' on *Street Fighter*, which will appeal to anyone with an interest in the subject matter. Umehara is a native Japanese speaker, but an English translation is available via the left audio channel, so headphones (specifically, the left one) are recommended.





BENNYFITS

A lot of streamers have their gimmicks. Bennyfits , however, is something of an oddity on Twitch – seemingly taking his inspiration from old-school, Saturday-morning kids' TV shows. You see, Bennyfits is a puppet. He streams a variety of popular games, such as *The Division*, and while he doesn't particularly offer anything massively different from the majority of other let's-play streamers out there, Bennyfits is notable as it is a *character* streaming, rather than a personality or athlete. Twitch itself noticed the appeal for the off-kilter character and granted him partnership fairly quickly after the channel went live in 2016.





CLASSYPAX

Okay, so we've included another *GTA* Online role-player. But stay with us on this. Classypax actually uses stock footage and splices it in his stream to help turn his *GTA* playthroughs into something that resembles a real-life trashy TV show. While he isn't as committed to role-playing as SherrifEli, Classypax is worth checking out for his production values alone. Recently, he's taken to using a full introduction sequence for his character Deuce 'The Juice' Montgomery – a washed-up Vinewood stuntman – using *GTA*'s cinematic camera mode. You can check it out at bit.ly/deucejuice.



DATA STREAM → PORTAL WRITER CHET FALISZEK HAS CONFIRMED HIS DEPARTURE FROM VALVE


IF ANYONE'S GONNA RUIN YOUR NIGHT, MAE, IT REALLY SHOULD BE YOU.



"It also has a lot of good, solid Rust Belt feelings in it and I just like that as well, because you don't see a lot of that"

KARLA ZIMONJA, CO-FOUNDER, FULLBRIGHT

WHY I ♥...

NIGHT IN THE WOODS

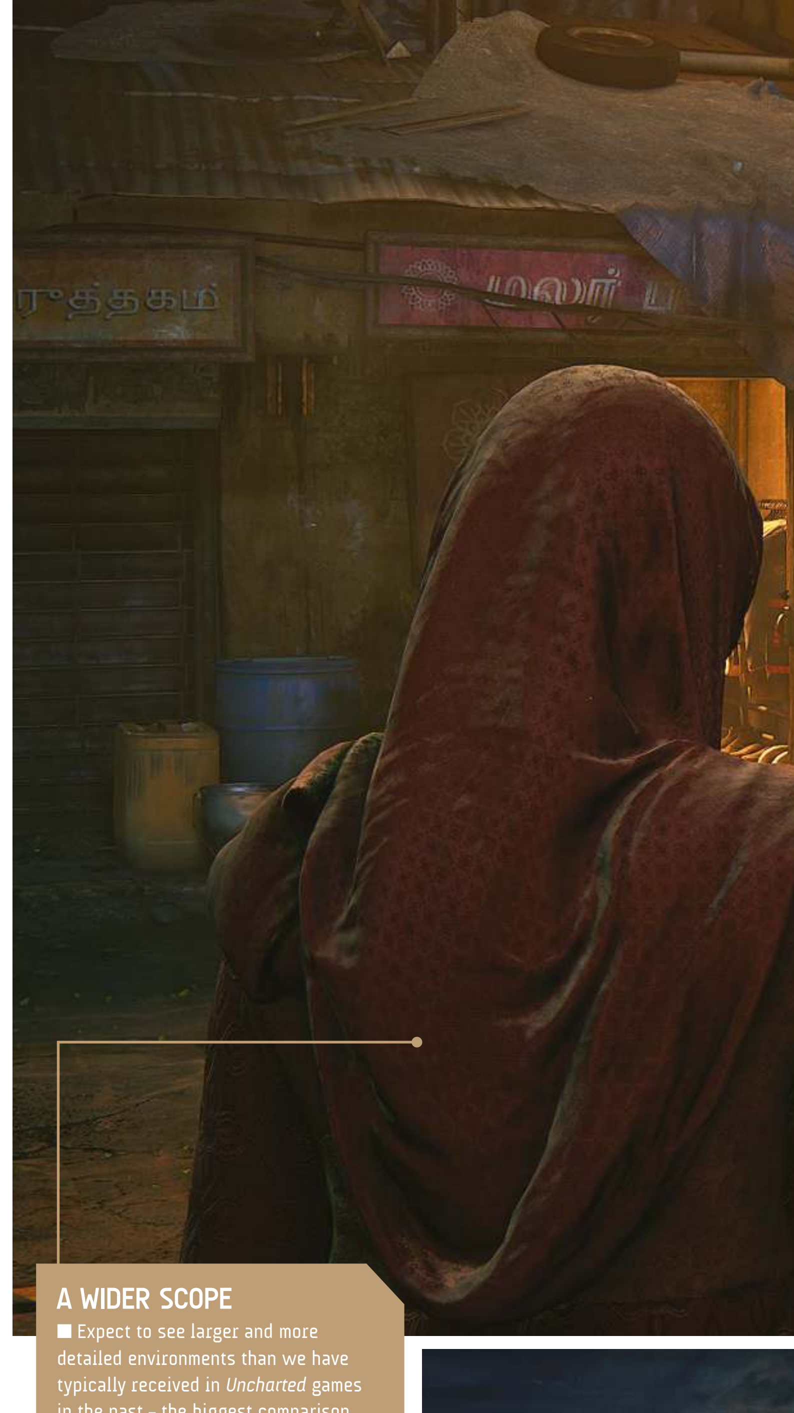
KARLA ZIMONJA, CO-FOUNDER, FULLBRIGHT

I am still extremely excited about Night In The Woods. *It is just a really satisfying character piece with a number of interesting characters. It's not dissimilar to sort of what we do here at Fullbright, having a relatively small cast of characters that really gets developed as you move through the plot. I feel it is just uniquely satisfying in that regard… plus it's very pretty! And it also has a lot of good, solid Rust Belt feelings in it and I just like that as well, because you don't see a lot of that. And also the authenticity level is very high because the devs have experience in that part of the country and have family there and grew up in these circumstances, so they really are able to bring the believability and the real aspects of it that make you believe it. That means a lot.*

AS THICK AS THIEVES

■ *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* will be the first game in the series to pull focus away from Nathan Drake, with the standalone DLC settling on two familiar faces: Chloe Frazer and Nadine Ross. Experiencing how their relationship emerges out of conflict and evolves into something greater will be a big part of *The Lost Legacy* as Naughty Dog looks to tell a more contained, vibrant, and ultimately human, adventure.





Uncharted: The Lost Legacy

CONCEPT ■ A standalone story in the Uncharted universe, *The Lost Legacy* is an opportunity for Naughty Dog to explore a different corner of its series away from Nathan Drake.

More of a good thing

Nathan Drake may have hung up his holster for the last time, but that doesn't mean there aren't still stories to tell in Naughty Dog's *Uncharted* series. *The Lost Legacy* sees fan-favourite treasure hunter Chloe Frazer heading out on an adventure across India with Nadia Ross, the mercenary that caused so many problems for Drake in *Uncharted 4*.

As a standalone story, *The Lost Legacy* is an opportunity for Naughty Dog to approach the series from an all-new perspective, increasing the size of its environments, introducing new gameplay mechanics and an array of new characters for us to fall in love with. That means that, while the core of the experience will be classically 'Uncharted', you should expect a story that will dare to run a little rougher round the edges – grittier and grounded in (a relative sense of) reality. This is an interesting experiment and will largely give us an insight into what the future holds for *Uncharted*. Can it survive without the quips and irreverent humour that Nathan Drake brought to the table? We will find out come 22 August 2017 when *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* launches for PS4.

A WIDER SCOPE

■ Expect to see larger and more detailed environments than we have typically received in *Uncharted* games in the past – the biggest comparison point likely to be *Uncharted 4*'s impressive Madagascar locale. Larger environments will then combine with updated gameplay opportunities, such as stealth becoming more viable, with the addition of weapons such as a silent pistol and Chloe's proficiency in martial arts to make hand-to-hand combat more enjoyable.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: USA
Publisher: Sony
Developer: Naughty Dog
Release: 22 August 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

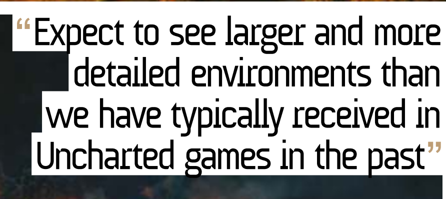
One of the most important studios in the world, Naughty Dog has become a force in triple-A gaming, consistently delivering some of the most enjoyable and technically impressive adventure games the world has ever seen, across three decades of activity.

High Point

***The Last Of Us* was huge for the industry, pushing what we believed was possible with narrative-led experiences, an achievement that is still yet to be surpassed by any other studio.**

Developer History

Crash Bandicoot **1996 [PSone]**
Jak And Daxter **2001 [PS2]**
The Last Of Us **2013 [PS3]**
Uncharted 4: A Thief's End **2016 [PS4]**



"Expect to see larger and more detailed environments than we have typically received in Uncharted games in the past"

A CONDENSED STORY

■ As a standalone title, Naughty Dog is focused on ensuring *The Lost Legacy* tells a condensed story, while still finding a balance between the small character moments and the grandiose set pieces that the series has become known for. The story is larger than *The Last Of Us*' DLC, *Left Behind*, and expected to run for around ten hours, giving the studio ample opportunity to explore its characters and Indian setting.



STONER ROCK

The different abilities granted to you by the Infinity Stones can greatly affect the way you play each character. For example, the Time Stone gives you an invincible teleport/dash, the Space Stone pulls your opponent towards you and the Power Stone gives you a powerful attack that causes a wall bounce. All of which can be used to slightly modify the approach you take in a battle with or against certain characters. The Infinity Storm modes completely swing the bout momentum in your favour while the meter depletes. Out of these, Space is the most interesting, as it sticks a massive transparent box around your opponent, restricting their movement to that area while you plan your next attack.



Above: Returning characters share similarities with their previous game counterparts, but the stones and new tag system change things up a lot. Right: Fan favourite Strider Hiryu returns alongside series newcomer and big bad Ultron, who merges with Mega Man villain Sigma to become – you guessed it – Ultron Sigma. United by a desire to rid the world of organic life, they're the antagonists of the new cinematic story mode.

Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite

CONCEPT ■ The most popular of the team-based beat 'em ups, that requires you to learn which characters complement each other's fight style and use them to defeat your opponent.

It's Marvel, baby! Capcom takes on the comic giant once again

The media world is a very different place to what it was the last time a *Marvel Vs Capcom* game was released. Marvel is now owned by Disney and is responsible for several of the biggest movies of ALL TIME. If anything, the characters involved in this game are exponentially more well-known to the masses than Ryu, Guile et al and potentially could attract a significantly larger audience to fighting games. It is clear from only a short amount of time around the game, and hearing from those involved in its creation, that they are taking every precaution to not make the same mistakes they made with the launch of *Street Fighter V*. They've already confirmed it has a full cinematic story mode, for example.

Jokes aside, Capcom clearly knows full well that the Marvel license is going to attract a fair few eyes, many of those who aren't exactly experts in the field of all things fighting, and to help them get on board, it has streamlined some of the systems that make up the backbone of the combat. There are now four main attack buttons, light and heavy punches and kicks, with the left shoulder button used for tagging a partner and right to use your Infinity Stone. That's it. For a genre that has always found itself leaning towards the need for expensive fightsticks, *MvC:I* is clearly designed with the straight out of the box controller in mind.

It's not just the button layout that has been made more straightforward, certain inputs have been unified across all of the characters. For instance, a classic *MvC* combo is several hits on the ground, a move that 'launches' your opponent into the air and then get several hits while they're up there - an aerial rave, as they're known. It's a staple combo, but each character has their own way of doing it. Now, every character shares one standardised combo - light punch, light kick, heavy kick and then down and heavy punch will start an aerial rave, no matter who you've chosen. Sure, there will be plenty of different ways to do this, but this means that beginners will categorically have one they can go to when needed. It's a great way to introduce new players to such an important mechanic.

But what about the hardcore? What about those *Marvel* players who have been waiting for this game? Well, the technical side of things now comes from the tag system. You no longer have to tag in partners at specific times during combos, but instead can tag them into the battle at any point. It's completely free for you to choose when to switch them in or out, and can cause some really tricky situations. Getting zoned out as Hulk? Chuck a fireball with your partner then tag Hulk in to use it as a shield as he advances. Faking someone out with a neutral jump only to bring in your partner is a devious, if gimmicky, trick that shows that this system is going to be used for some truly devious stuff as players become more familiar with the characters.

Then there's the Infinity Stones. The three in the current build - Space, Time and Power - all had two uses. One you could use whenever you wanted, a bit like a V-Skill in *Street Fighter V*, whilst the other, once a meter has filled up, allowed you to perform an Infinity Storm, a big, momentum shifting power that changes things in a major way while the meter depletes. The trick here is whether you use the Stones to emphasise character strengths or cover for potential weaknesses. It is going to be interesting to see what exactly the remaining Stones bring to the table, and how players are going to be able to use these to imprint their own style on the characters they choose.

> "The Partner Switch mechanic, although intuitive and easy to understand, is much more open than it's ever been"
>
> PETER 'COMBOFIEND' ROSAS CAPCOM

What will make or break *Marvel Vs Capcom: Infinite* is how these new systems flourish outside of those initial few weeks and months. It may appear a little bit different at first, but at its core, this new game is still very much Marvel, baby.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
Release: 19 September 2017
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

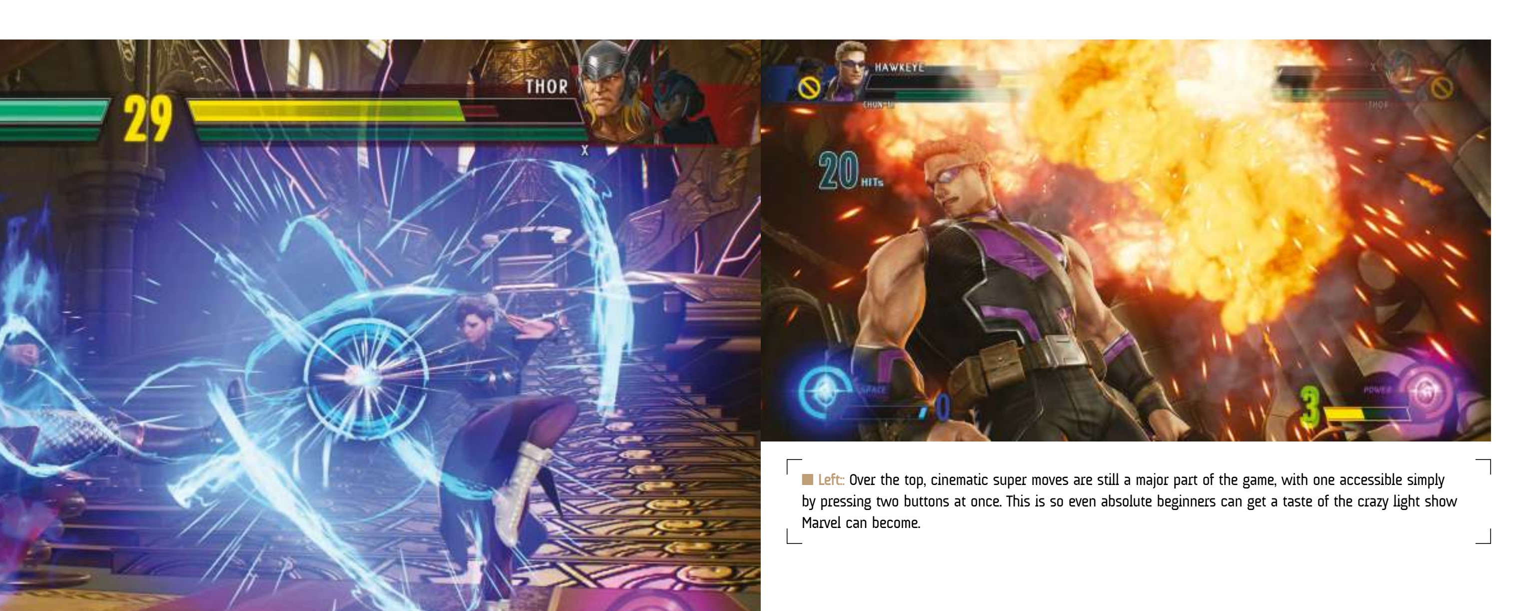
Capcom is behind many of gaming's greatest series and popularised the 2D fighting game genre with the release of *Street Fighter II*. It then went on to push it forward repeatedly with the release of a frankly absurd amount of incredible entries in the genre - many of which are regarded as all-time classics.

Developer History

Street Fighter II **1991 [Arcade]**
Darkstalkers: The Night Warriors **1994 [Arcade]**
Marvel Vs Capcom: Clash Of Super Heroes **1998 [Arcade]**
Street Fighter V **2016 [PS4, PC]**

High Point

The controversial third entry in the *Street Fighter* series, which replaced most of the iconic characters with all-new but really interesting fighters, was refined in 1999 with the *3rd Strike* iteration and remains a genre high watermark.



■ Left: Over the top, cinematic super moves are still a major part of the game, with one accessible simply by pressing two buttons at once. This is so even absolute beginners can get a taste of the crazy light show Marvel can become.

"There are two big new additions that should go a long way to shaking up both the world and the gameplay options"

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC, Switch
Origin: UK
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer: TT Games
Release: 14 November 2017
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

The TT Games run on the LEGO franchise has surely made it one of the most lucrative developers in the business today and it shows no signs of slowing down. As it stands it has regular LEGO releases, *LEGO Worlds* and *LEGO Dimensions* on the go.

Developer History

LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game **2005 [Multi]**
LEGO Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures **2008 [Multi]**
LEGO Dimensions **2015 [Multi]**
LEGO Worlds **2016 [Multi]**

High Point

While other toys-to-life titles have fallen away, *LEGO Dimensions* appears to be holding strong, not least because the toys with the game are still LEGO pieces at the end of the day and can be played with on their own.

LEGO Marvel Super Heroes 2

CONCEPT ■ TT Games returns to the Marvel universe, this time bringing together characters and concepts from across the many dimensions of the comic empire.

When all else fails, Baby Groot

How much innovation is enough? We keep asking ourselves this question when it comes to the LEGO series of games, in part because TT Games seems to be working hard to keep its titles feeling different and fresh, and yet they invariably feel more or less just like the last. The difference between enjoying and ignoring a new LEGO title can often come down to whether or not you feel an attachment to the license being satirised and celebrated.

LEGO Marvel Super Heroes 2 appears to be going a few extra steps to shake up what has become perceived to be the TT Games formula. There are two big new additions that should go a long way to shaking up both the world and the gameplay options you have available to you. The first is that villain Kang has arrived from the end of time to seek out and challenge the Avengers and in so doing has brought with him some interesting time-bending mechanics. As you play through missions and challenges you'll have to contend with and think about how time manipulation could alter the state of the world around you. Is there a pile of parts and rubble for a complex machine in front of you? Maybe it can't be built like you would normally do, but lure an attack in that area and you might force Kang to turn back time for a moment and reconstitute a starfighter ship.

The other thing that Kang is doing, since he's a strangely honourable villain and is looking for an open and genuine challenge from the Avengers – not just a fight where he can cheat his way to a win – is he's brought in versions of Marvel's greatest heroes from across the multiverse and crashed them together in one massive new venue, Chronopolis. This is a giant city that comprises portions of multiple worlds, from the streets of New York from the universe we know, to the world of Spider-Man 2099 and Spider-Man Noir (both of whom appear in the game). We got a glimpse of the scale of this city and it is mightily impressive and packed with content.

The heroes themselves look to be as varied as ever, but also much more nuanced and detailed than the past. Where many heroes might have felt like re-skins of each other, now they have distinct special abilities. Starlord's ability is a particular highlight, putting on his headphones, causing everyone nearby to start jigging as he shoots and dances around them. TT Games seems to have got the balance right again.



■ Above: With the game no longer coming to Xbox 360, PS3 or Wii U, TT Games has been able to concentrate its efforts on the more powerful systems and push for greater fidelity across the board. The results are pretty impressive.



Right: *Surviving Mars* has been inspired by visions of space exploration and colonisation from the Sixties, so expect there to be some rather strange twists on modern technology as it might have been interpreted back in the day.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Bulgaria
Publisher: Paradox Interactive
Developer: Haemimont Games
Release: TBC 2018
Players: 1

Developer Profile

This Bulgarian team has established itself as the master of strategy city building and political manoeuvring, kicking off in 2000 with *Tzar: The Burden Of The Crown* and building up to taking over the *Tropico* series in 2009. Mixing the best of *Civilization* and *Sim City*, the games have gone from strength to strength over the years.

Developer History

Tzar: The Burden Of The Crown **2000 [PC]**
Celtic Kings: Rage Of War **2002 [PC]**
Tropico 3 **2009 [PC]**
Victor Vran **2015 [PC]**

High Point

Tropico 5 is probably the best example of Haemimont's work with its most polished interface and most involved gameplay. It ported rather well to consoles too, which opened it up to a lot more players.

Surviving Mars

CONCEPT It's classic city and community building, only this time in a place without oxygen and with mysteries to discover as you must make Mars your home.

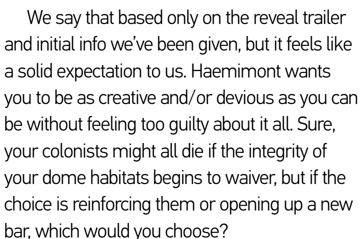
What happens under the dome, stays in the dome



The allure of the Red Planet has made it a rich source of stories and adventures over the years, with gaming being no exception, and now the team behind the *Tropico* series is turning its own brand of sometimes-irreverent city-building gameplay towards a Mars colonisation experience. *Surviving Mars* promises to be a challenging and versatile new offering from Haemimont, which has been building and playing with its dictatorship sim for many years now. Humour has always been at the heart of how it sort to ground and contextualise your behaviour in that game and the same appears to be true here.

We say that based only on the reveal trailer and initial info we've been given, but it feels like a solid expectation to us. Haemimont wants you to be as creative and/or devious as you can be without feeling too guilty about it all. Sure, your colonists might all die if the integrity of your dome habitats begins to waiver, but if the choice is reinforcing them or opening up a new bar, which would you choose?

As it stands, the hostile environment of Mars means facing some more immediate and life-threatening problems than you might typically be used to, but it also opens up some exciting new possibilities. For starters you'll find a number of different mysteries on the Red Planet that you can poke your nose into. Some might lead to amazing new discoveries and the rapid advancement of your colony, while others may bring about your early doom. The more you search and chart the world around you the better your chances of making a go of this new community that you've sought to build.



Below: Every dome you build will act as a kind of self-contained community and develop a personality of its own, according to Haemimont.



> "You're free to be as giving and generous or as manipulative and selfish a leader as you care to be"

To keep things interesting inside the domes you'll find that your colonists are all individually simulated, acting upon their own personality traits and influences around them. That means that you'll need to keep an eye on the people you put in key positions in case they begin to buckle under the strain of their role or otherwise resent your control in some way. There's no telling what someone might do if you push them to the edge in this kind of setting. As with Haemimont's previous titles, you're free to be as giving and generous or as manipulative and selfish a leader as you care to be, which in turn will make a big difference to how you build up resources and how well your colony is managed.

And last but not least, Haemimont has already confirmed that 'expansive' community mod support will be made available for this game. We're not sure just how extensive that will prove to be, but we do enjoy a bit of modding in sims like this.

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Darksiders III

CONCEPT ■ Five years since the original release of *Darksiders II*, this is a sequel emerging out of the ashes of THQ and Vigil games.

Rise from the ashes

We can hardly believe it, but *Darksiders III* is actually happening. After being rumoured and teased for so many years, THQ Nordic has finally revealed its plans, bringing the popular open-world action-adventure game to PS4, PC and Xbox One in 2018. There will, of course, be fresh challenges to conquer as Gunfire Games works to continue the legacy set by now-defunct (and original developer) Vigil Games, attempting to once again find an energised balance between exploration, hack-and-slash combat and environmental puzzles. This all centres around a new protagonist, Fury, an "unpredictable and enigmatic" mage who is widely considered to be the most powerful of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. *Darksiders III* has a lot to live up to, but if this early reveal has proved anything it's that there's a real passion and desire at this studio to not only build a faithful sequel but advance and build upon what has come before.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: USA
Publisher: THQ Nordic
Developer: Gunfire Games
Release: 2018
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Gunfire Games formed in 2014, retaining the spirit of former *Darksiders* developer Vigil Games, and a number of staff that worked on the first two games, including the game director, executive producer, technical director and lead environmental artist. The studio also worked on the release of *Darksiders II: Deathinitive Edition*.

High Point

Chronos was a killer-app for virtual reality at a time when we were desperate to see larger, more ambitious and fully-fledged adventures.

Developer History

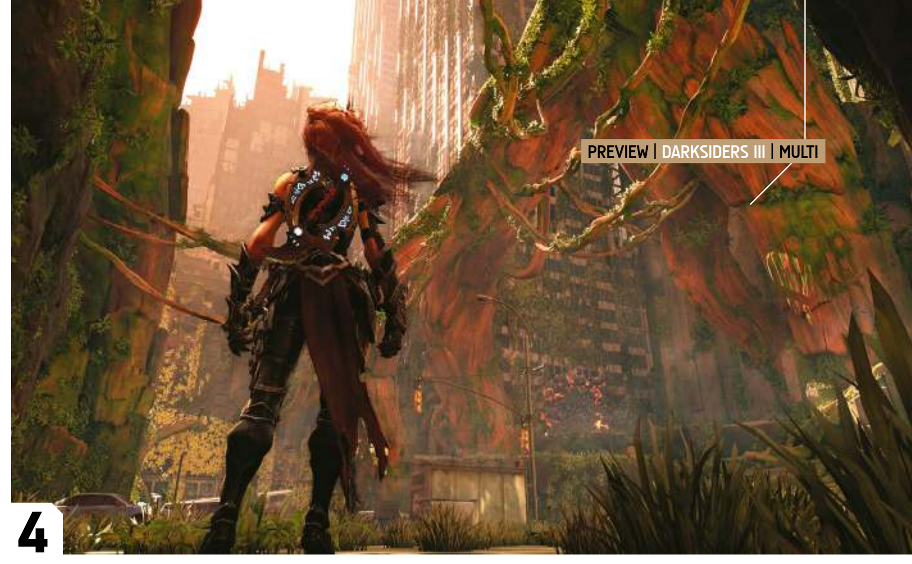
HeroBound: Spirit Champion **2017 [PC]**
Chronos **2016 [PC]**
Dead And Buried **2016 [PC]**
Darksiders II: Deathinitive Edition **2015 [PS4, Xbox One]**

1 A WORLD CONTEXTUALISED BY ITS DEMONS

Gunfire Games wants to create a world that, in spite of the chaos that it has found itself enveloped in, feels *real*. The idea was to create a complex and connected open-world that is both logical and functional, physically scaling around you in an attempt to give this warped vision of Earth a stronger sense of reality. Everything from the placement of enemies to the type of hidden collectibles you find will be contextualised, making the entire game feel as if it is one sprawling dungeon, with each area affected by the presence of a Deadly Sin.



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"Joe Madureira briefly returned to breathe fresh life into protagonist Fury for the new release, expanding on his original concept designs from 2010"

2 SOUL BOUND TO A FAMILIAR TIMELINE

Fans of the *Darksiders* series will no doubt take comfort in the knowledge that this isn't a reboot or reimagining of the world Vigil spent so much time and effort establishing. The events of *Darksiders III* will run parallel to the events of the two previous games, pitting Fury in a battle against the physical embodiment of the Seven Deadly Sins – running rampant across Earth following their escape from containment during the apocalypse. So don't expect to see much of War, imprisoned by the Charred Council, while Death will be off attempting to free his brother from captivity.

3 A STEP INTO THE UNKNOWN

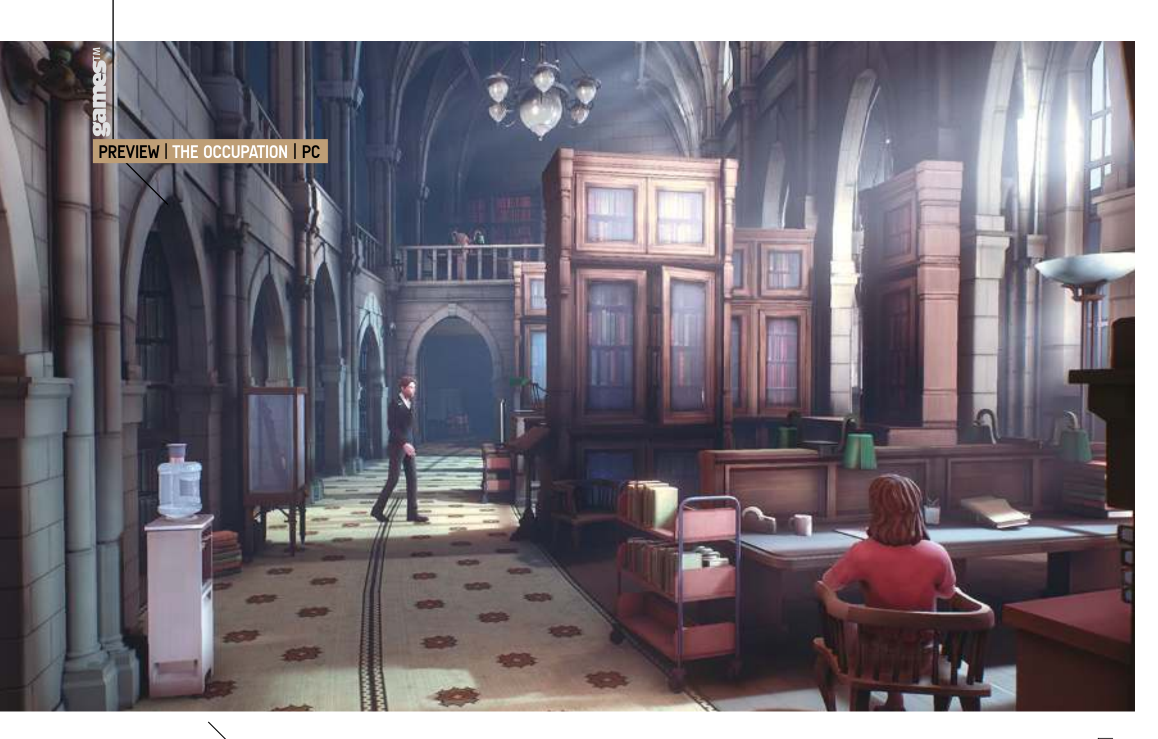
A new *Darksiders* game means a new protagonist, and this time it's Fury's turn to take to the spotlight. She's an imposing character with fiery, billowing red hair and a magically enhanced whip. *Darksiders III* is taking a refined approach to combat, with less enemies appearing on screen – Fury can't take a beating like Death or War – and a larger focus on intimate individual instances of combat. Expect her to move faster than War, her dodges particular and intricate, her slashes precise and deadly. Expect all of this to be enhanced as you push further through the game, as the series' focus on RPG elements is confirmed to be making a return.

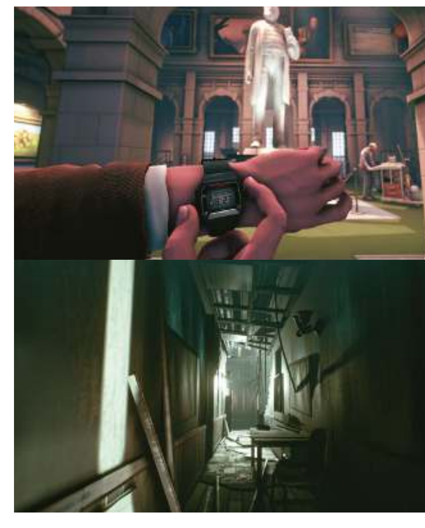
4 JOE MAD IS BACK, SORT OF

While Gunfire Games has a respectable amount of ex-Vigil staff on its payroll, the absence of *Darksiders* creator Joe Madureira was a little disappointing. But that isn't to say the legendary creative has had zero involvement in the project. Madureira briefly returned to breathe fresh life into protagonist Fury for the new release, expanding on his original concept designs from 2010 before the new team began mapping her out. Is it disappointing that Madureira won't be presiding over the entire experience? Sure. But at least he's had a part to play in *Darksiders*' highly anticipated return to life.

5 IT ISN'T COMING OUT UNTIL 2018

This long rumoured and highly anticipated sequel isn't something Gunfire is willing to rush and that means a long wait is in store for any franchise fans. As it stands, the studio is pulling together the framework of the game, implementing the various environmental shifts and ensuring that its sprawling open world connects properly with the refocused combat and enemy designs (some new, some old favourites). There's no word on whether *Darksiders III* will make use of PS4 Pro and Scorpio, but it seems like highly likely at this stage.





■ Above: It's never easy demoing a narrative-focused game for the first time, as it's difficult to properly convey the themes and pacing. That said, our early hands-on playtest of *The Occupation* shows a lot of promise.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: White Paper Games
Developer: In-house
Release: 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

An independent developer out of Manchester, White Paper Games formed in 2012. The studio released its debut title in 2014, with the eight staff contributing to the critically-acclaimed *Ether One*. Now that's out the door, it is now working on its new title, *The Occupation*.

Developer History

Ether One **2014 [PS4, PC]**

High Point

As far as debuts go, *Ether One* was a massive statement of intent from White Paper Games. A first-person adventure that dealt with difficult subjects, built with an interesting underlying concept.

The Occupation

CONCEPT ■ Take control of the destiny of the British population, working as a journalist to uncover a shady government that threatens civil liberties.

Never trust the government

Here we have something that has real potential. But much like any experience attempting to slot into the ever-coveted immersive sim space, it does run the risk of imploding under the weight of its own ambition. We've had the opportunity to sit down with White Paper Games' latest game and, as it stands, the jury is out. Then again, it's clear we barely had a chance to scratch the surface of *The Occupation*.

Cast as an investigative reporter, *The Occupation* gives you just four hours – in-game and in real life – to explore a government facility and sneakily accrue enough information to launch an exposé on the controversial 'Union Act'. With the civil liberties of the British population threatened, you are essentially being given the opportunity to decide the narrative – quite literally.

Moving in first person through a relatively attractive-looking office to build a case, you're free to act and progress as you wish during those four hours. The security guards make it immediately clear that your presence isn't exactly welcome and your access to floors and rooms is suitably restricted. That's where creativity comes into focus. It can be relatively easy to get stuck in *The Occupation*, so rooted it feels in reality – if you see a locked door in real life, how often do you stand and wait for somebody to let you in before you begin crawling through crawl spaces? Yeah, you don't. And it can take a while to acclimatise to doing so in this environment.

The game will, we're told, push you to make calculated decisions based on the evidence and information in front of you. Every action will have a suitable reaction, White Paper Games asserted before we had even sat down at a keyboard, although we were only able to capture but a glimpse of this in action. There were moments where the immersion came crashing down, such a moment we darted into a security office – in an effort to retrieve an item confiscated from our briefcase – only to find that it wasn't possible, nor were we scolded for entering the room to begin with. The studio wants every player to walk away with different stories and a different experience but right now, at this pre-alpha stage of development, everybody is telling the same tale. One of ambition and execution clashing, of big ideas, excellent groundwork and a long way to go to make *The Occupation* as great as it could be. It isn't easy to demo a narrative-focused game and that's why it's well worth watching out for this one as we edge ever closer to its Q4 2017 release window.

> "The studio wants every player to walk away with different stories and a different experience"



■ Above: In a bit of a mind-bending twist, *The Occupation* runs in real time. You have just four hours to find the evidence you need to move against the Union Act; it's a stressful, but ultimately engaging, experience.

■ Right: There's going to be masses of character customisation in this game so that you can craft your golfer in all sorts of interesting ways.



■ Below: Sony's latest entry in the golfing series is as sunny and colourful as ever. If golf courses were guaranteed to always look as cool and engaging as this we would be tempted to play the game in real life.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Sony Interactive Entertainment
Developer: Clap Hanz, SIE Japan Studio
Release: 29 August 2017
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Since it was founded in 1998, Clap Hanz has only been involved in the *Everybody's Golf* series (and its spin-off *Everybody's Tennis*). We would imagine that either means there's been a fair amount of turnover in the staff there or they lost their minds years ago and just keep making these colourful fairway experiences out of some kind of repetitious, ritualistic commitment.

Developer History

Everybody's Golf 2 **2000 [PSone]**
Everybody's Tennis **2006 [PS2]**
Everybody's Stress Buster **2009 [PSP]**
Everybody's Golf 6 **2012 [PS3, Vita]**

High Point

Everybody's Golf 3 remains the best reviewed of the series thus far, although we would say that the PS3 incarnation was just as strong in terms of gameplay and course design.

Everybody's Golf

CONCEPT ■ The long-running golfing series makes a welcome first appearance on the PS4 with some open world design and array of mini-games.

Fun for all the family

If we lean in any particular direction when it comes to the question of sports simulation versus sports arcade action, then it's likely you'll find us on the arcade side more often than not. Sims have their place and their challenge, but sometimes it's the arcade experience that manages to capture the true spirit of the sport or sometimes give new life to a pastime that might otherwise be a little dry.

Case in point is the *Everybody's Golf* series, one of our favourites when it comes to fairway fun. It's a golfing experience that's all about ease of access with its simple three button press swing mechanic, unfazed by experimentation by others with analogue stick control over the years. It's all about mass appeal with its bright, rainbow-infused designs, lush courses and masses of customisation for its characters. *Everybody's Golf* is imbued with an innocence and vibrancy that elevates and embellishes the golfing experience.

With this PS4 version of the game, marking a fresh start for the series as it reverts to a simple *Everybody's Golf* title (which will also be adopted in the US, losing its *Hot Shots Golf* moniker), Clap Hanz is diversifying its gameplay experience beyond the greens with a bunch of mini-games. You'll be able to race around in golf-karts, for instance, as well as do a little fishing and go treasure hunting, all in an open world.

The other key is that rather than unlocking pre-existing characters and costumes in the game you'll be creating and updating a personalised avatar for the first time in the series, which you will then be able to take online to meet up with friends. In this respect it's actually reminding us a little of the PS3's popular, but ill-fated, social hub PlayStation Home. The key difference being that you'll be experiencing this as a cartoon version of yourself (or whoever you want to appear to be) and you'll actually get to play some really good games within the world.

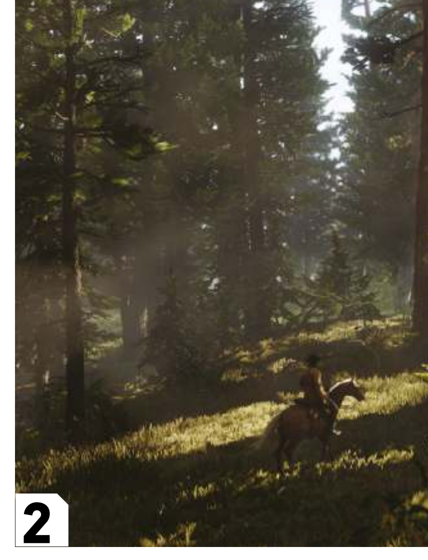
Everybody's Golf has always been a bit of an outsider experience with its arcade approach to a genre that has tended to thrive more in the simulation space, but as interest in *PGA Tour* appears to be waning, we wonder if a new generation of gamers might find this more appealing, much as we often have. As with most things in gaming, this tends to be a cyclical trend and the long wait for an *Everybody's Golf* sequel might mean it's come around just in time. It's rare that we pay this much attention to a golfing title, but Sony's looks like something special once again.



"You'll be able to race around in golf-karts as well as do a little fishing and go treasure hunting"



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"Red Dead Redemption 2 is boasting some vastly improved engine technology to work on current gen consoles"



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Red Dead Redemption 2

CONCEPT ■ The publisher famous for its *GTA* franchise turns its open world criminal skills to North America's frontier lifestyle in an age before autos.

The slow west worth waiting for

Rather than head into E3 with expectations elevated, Rockstar decided to get out ahead of the big show to tell us all that *Red Dead Redemption 2* will not be launching in 2017 as we had previously hoped. Instead the game will be launching in Spring 2018.

Anyone familiar with Rockstar won't be terribly surprised by this delay as it's a publisher with a history of games being pushed back in favour of longer development time, and with good reason. Again and again it has managed to create stunning and engaging new worlds to explore and we have to imagine that this is in part thanks to its development teams being given the space to hone and craft their creations. The original *Red Dead Redemption* itself was pushed back to a May release back in 2010, you may recall. But to help soften the potential blow this news may have on fans we can at least look at some new screens.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One
Origin: USA
Publisher: Rockstar Game
Developer: In-house
Release: Spring 2018
Players: 1-TBC

Developer Profile

While it's not been confirmed which team is handling *RDR2*, Rockstar San Diego is the franchise's usual home. Originally known as Angel Studios from 1984 to 2003 it was bought by Rockstar as *Red Dead Revolver* was finishing development. It has also worked on the *Midnight Club* series and helped on *LA Noire* and *GTA V*.

High Point

Working as the primary studio on *Red Dead Redemption* was an massive undertaking and one that the studio stepped up to with aplomb. It remains one of the best examples of sandbox gaming around.

Developer History

Midtown Madness **1999 [PC]**
Red Dead Revolver
2004 [PS2, Xbox]
Midnight Club: Los Angeles
2008 [PS3, 360]
Red Dead Redemption
2010 [PS3, 360]

1 INFO LIGHT

While Rockstar announced that *Red Dead Redemption 2* was being pushed back to Spring 2018 in terms of expected release date, it didn't give a lot of extra info, simply saying "some extra time is necessary to ensure that we can deliver the best experience possible for our fans." We would say that's fair enough and it's not as if these new images don't tell us anything. For instance, this masked bandit appears to be holding two different types of revolver as he dual wields, which is pretty interesting. The act of dual wielding wasn't actually possible in the original *RDR*, so that's a new feature confirmed and shown.



2 TREE HUGGING

We've been blessed so far this generation with depictions of forests, which isn't really something we were looking for from our games exactly, but we're pleased now that we have them. From *The Witcher 3* and *Horizon* to *Breath Of The Wild*, knotted woods and varieties of trees have been rather nicely recreated to create incredibly moody and engaging landscapes and *RDR2* is looking mightily impressive on this front. Just look at the variety of trees this game is depicting in this screen alone. There are all sorts of things going on and it all looks impressively realistic. No way of knowing if climbing these behemoths will be possible, but the prospect of some shootouts or hunting in such locales seems strong.

3 FROM DUSTY GROUND UP

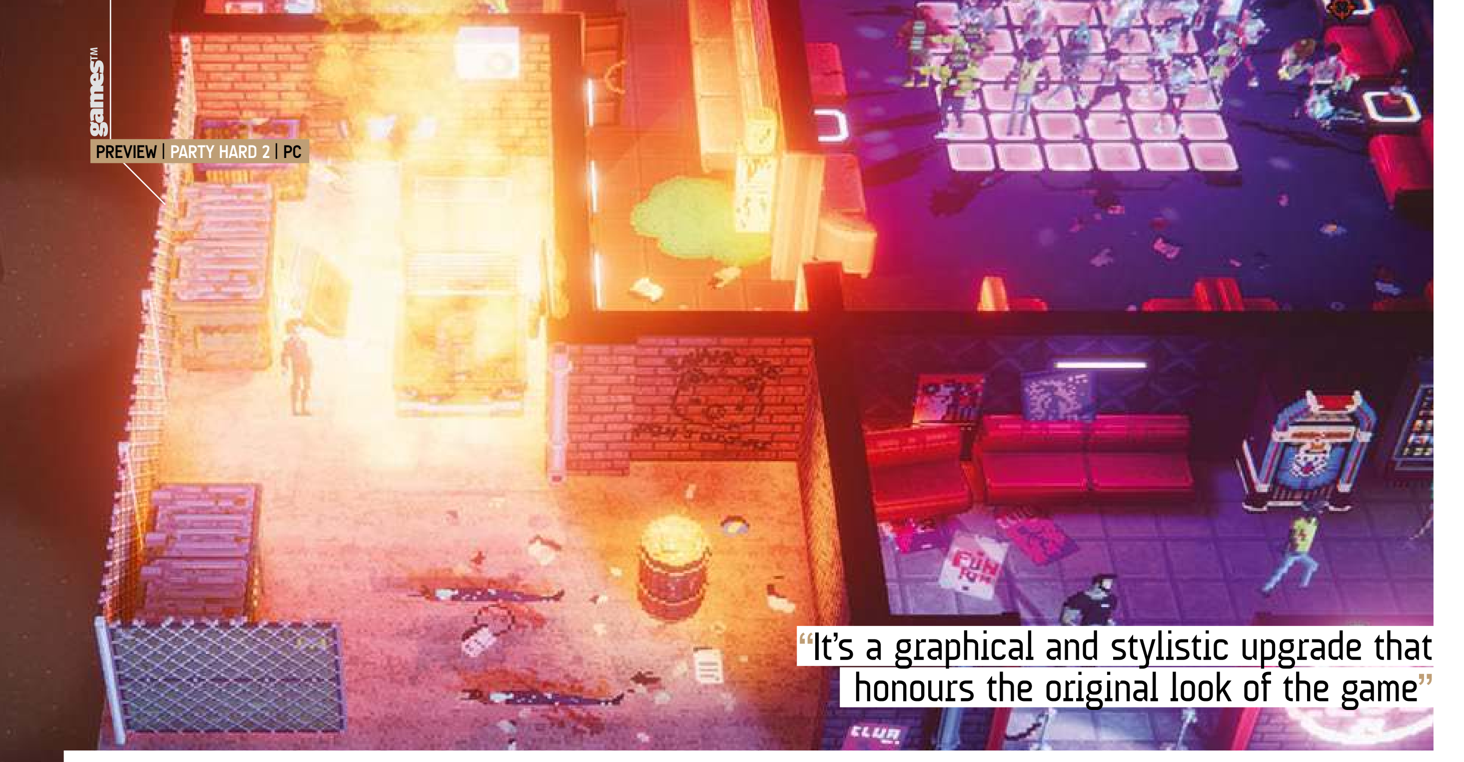
The common PR phrase of a game being "created from the ground up," was trotted out by Rockstar as it released these new images, which is unfortunate as it's a phrase that's become rather clichéd over the years and far too heavily overused to the point of dilution of its real meaning. In this instance *Red Dead Redemption 2* is boasting some vastly improved engine technology to work on current gen consoles. That not only means a game that should be visually more ambitious than *RDR*, but hopefully even more detailed and good-looking than *GTA V* on PS4, Xbox One and PC. Certainly images like these suggest that could well be the case.

4 CHECK OUT THE ETCHING

What a lovely pair of pistols these appear to be. We tried comparing these to some known revolver types from the Western frontier period and the best comparison we could find was a type of Smith & Wesson Model 3. Not a great help in dating this sequel, as those guns were in production from 1870 to 1915. That said they are rather reminiscent of a pistol owned by famous exhibition shooter Annie Oakley. She was active through the late 19th century and joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West show in 1885. Anyway, these are pretty fancy pistols that might be more common in a touring show or exhibition setting.

5 HERE COMES THE CHOO-CHOO

We probably pointed out from the very first trailer how much we wanted to see train heists in this game and since we're seeing them again in these images, we've been imagining all the ways that might play out. What we can see from this image is that whatever train lines are available will be making it faster and easier to traverse challenging terrain, which means they will be very handy for getting around the map (which we're expecting to be pretty big). Attempting to get on this train might prove difficult in an area like this, but the potential is there. In the mean time let's just admire those volumetric smoke and steam effects. They're pretty sweet.



"It's a graphical and stylistic upgrade that honours the original look of the game"

Party Hard 2

Above: Where the first game sent you on a murderous spree inspired by your neighbours being too loud, this game is about a guy who doesn't get a Christmas bonus. So clearly things are still relatively trivial.

CONCEPT Take out all required targets in busy locations without being spotted or caught in this fun and frivolous murder simulation.

Murder on the dancefloor

We're often partial to a bit of the old ultra violence so long as we feel that the game is either giving us a good excuse for why it's happening (war, self-defence, contract killing, they stole your newspaper) or is tongue in cheek enough about the whole murder and death thing to not have us feel so bad about it. *Party Hard* played that rather nicely first time around and it's doubling down on the concept with this follow-up.

The core premise of the game is relatively unchanged as you go on a murderous spree based on a relatively trivial slight. You must go from setting to setting finding ways to kill targeted individuals (or just everyone) without being spotted or, failing that, not getting caught by the cops. Kills can be achieved through items and weapons you're carrying, a knife being your default choice, or through using environmental hazards like faulty equipment, poorly mixed chemicals or explosive canisters left by cars.

But the success of the original release is allowing Pinokl to step up its game a little this time around. For starters, the flat pixelart world of the original has been replaced by more of a 2.5D environment that has 2D-styled characters inhabiting it. This means there's a physics engine running beneath everything, it opens up more depth in the game world and it has allowed for some more engaging explosion effects (which in turn adds some fun gameplay choices). It's a graphical and stylistic upgrade that honours the original look of the game, maintaining its fun animation style and simple charm, but also manages to give the whole game a more polished feel. On top of that the game is breaking out of its single-screen environments, so while your locations appear to be relatively contained once again, they at least stretch a little in every direction, meaning you need to sometimes take some risks or spy out opportunities with more care than before.

To aid you in this respect Pinokl has added some important player upgrades that you should find interesting. First is something called Party Vision that helps you identify objects of interest, potential booby traps, stronger enemies and targets of interest. It works in the *Batman Arkham* or *Tomb Raider* reboot tradition and while it's not terribly important to the current beta (that you can download and play for free right now) it might well prove useful in the final game. Additionally there's now a multi-kill attack you can utilise called Insta-Kill that takes out all targets within a defined radius around you. Good for taking out targets clumped together. And finally you now have an expanded inventory allowing you to carry and switch between four items to use whenever you need. All smart upgrades for a sequel that looks very good indeed.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Ukraine
Publisher: tinyBuild
Developer: Pinokl Games, Kverta
Release: TBC 2017
Players: 1

Developer Profile

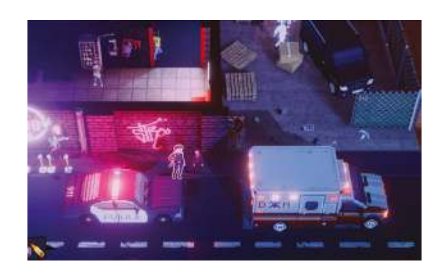
Pinokl doesn't have a long list of titles behind it that are available globally, having started out slow on browser and smartphone releases very different from the game that would really grab the world's attention, *Party Hard*. Cute, animal-based releases and robot brawlers were the key interests before the developer moved into party-stopping violence simulation.

Developer History

Party Hard
2015 [Multi]
Mecha Titans
2014 [iOS]

High Point

Party Hard is the game that has helped to put Pinokl on the map with its great sense of humour, challenging gameplay and inventive level design. It showed great potential and *Party Hard 2* will be looking to capitalise.

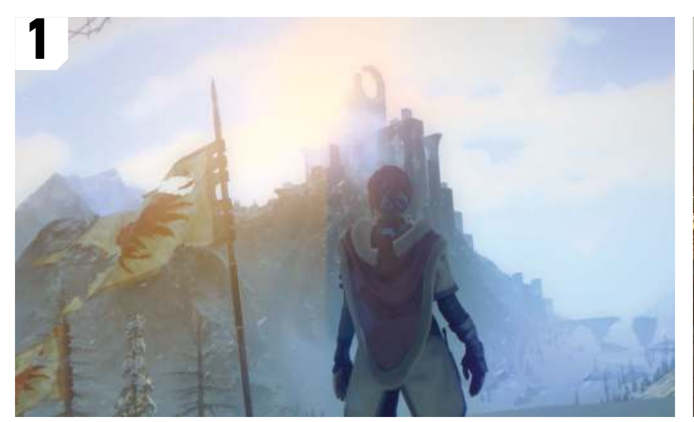


Above: Thanks to the 3D upgrade in the environments there are some gorgeous lighting effects being brought to bear in this game



SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

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PRAEY FOR THE GODS

Format: **PC, PS4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **No Matter Studios**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Dec 2017**

1 No Matter's tribute to the giant climbing and toppling gameplay of *Shadow Of The Colossus* reappeared suddenly in recent weeks with a slight name change, but a renewed commitment to release a closed beta soon. Apparently Zenimax made a trademark infringement claim against No Matter to protect Arkane's *Prey*. Trademark law can be a messy business, but No Matter is in no position to fight it, so its game gets an extra 'a' in the title and a little extra attention. Maybe not the worst trade-off, but regardless the game is looking great still, and apparently the team has made some big strides with its physics engine.

TAVERN KEEPER

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Greenheart Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2018**

2 The team behind *Game Dev Tycoon* is stretching itself out a little with an ambitious magical world full of adventure and monsters, but rather than have you felling dragons, you'll be the one behind the bar as the heroes pass through, hearing their tales and making sure they're well rested before their next quest. *Tavern Keeper* looks like it has all the trappings of a classic business management sim, but with added humour and insanity. Expand your business to offer new services, hire staff and gradually upgrade your tavern to become the hot spot every sword-wielding, axe-swinging and wand-twirling wannabe seeks for shelter.

A MORTICIAN'S TALE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Laundry Bear Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

3 Pitching itself as a 'death positive' experience, this is another business sim, but with a decidedly more macabre feel. You run a funeral home, preparing dead bodies for burial or cremation, consoling bereaved families and generally coping with the job. It's got a great style to it with a limited colour palette really selling a sort of kitsch goth look. We'd say that videogames have had a relatively glib attitude towards death, so it's going to be interesting to experience something more contemplative on the subject for once. From what we've heard so far it could be quite an uplifting and engaging new kind of experience.

MOONLIGHTER

Format: **PC, PS4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **11 bit studios**
Developer: **Digital Sun Games**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

4 This is another nice spin on some classic *Legend Of Zelda* by way of *Diablo* gameplay as you take on the role of a shopkeeper in a town founded beside gates that lead to mysterious other realms. While your day-to-day is about finding and selling items of interest to passing adventurers, you're also something of a budding hero yourself so you must venture through the gates, battle monsters and bring back valuable items. It's all brought to life in a classic pixelart style and we have to say we like the wind animations a lot. Some of the enemy design is looking excellent too. Apparently you can also play it as a pretty pure management game.

FORMULA FUSION

Format: **PC, PS4, Xbox One**
Publisher: **R8 Games**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBC 2017**

5 If you've been hankering for a full sequel to the classic *WipEout* series then this might be it. Not only was developer R8 Games founded by *WipEout 3* artist Andrew Walker, but this game also has the backing of legendary *WipEout* concept and graphic art team The Designers Republic. That studio was heavily credited for the cool aesthetic of the original games and its fantastic iconography. As a result *Formula Fusion* has some great looking team designs, insane looking vehicles and plays at a crazy pace. And Leon Switch is providing the all-important original dubstep soundtrack so you have the right tunes pounding as you play.



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DEVELOPED BY BUNGIE, PRODUCED BY THE COMMUNITY, THREE YEARS IN THE MAKING: A SHOOTER FINALLY CAPABLE OF DEFINING THE GENERATION

Bungie had no choice but to burn it all down. The City and the Tower, your Light and your loot, all of it lost, your Guardian consumed by the flames of the Red War. For Bungie this was the only clear way to close out a turbulent chapter in the studio's history; leaving it free to turn a page and begin one anew without the weight of past indiscretions hanging around its neck like an albatross. As game director Luke Smith is quick to tell anybody that is willing to listen: "*Destiny 2* is going to be a new beginning, for everyone."

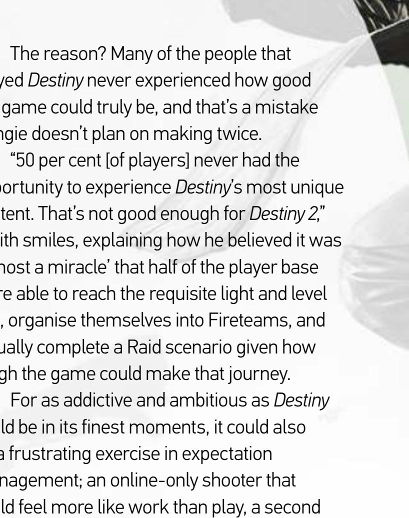
It's to be a convergence, of sorts. Bringing veteran Guardians and new players alike into Bungie's immeasurably complex universe, not to mention an opportunity for lapsed players to work their way back into the fight for humanity's survival without feeling the need to push against *Destiny*'s ever-shifting state of play. "To us," Smith says, "a sequel represents the opportunity to start fresh."

Could this have been achieved without reducing our beloved Gjallarhorn to exotic ash? Perhaps, but the drive behind *Destiny 2*'s incredible regeneration is born out of a desire to answer a question that has long troubled the studio: "How do we make it easier to find the fun?"

"We are expressly designing the game for it to be a fresh start for all players," Mark Noseworthy, *Destiny 2*'s project lead, tells **games™**. "And so that means taking a bunch of our systems and collapsing them down, streamlining them and simply making them better; rolling them out in such a way that you don't need the internet to learn how to play *Destiny* optimally."

"Over the years, as there have been additional DLCs – as we have introduced more mechanics and systems – the layers of complexity did get pretty heavy. With *Destiny 2* we wanted to make sure that everybody gets the best experience possible," he says, asking himself that all-important question: "How do we make it easier to find the fun?"

It's a thought that bounces between each of the developers we meet while in LA for *Destiny 2*'s lavish gameplay reveal. There's Luke Smith, game designer, and his partner in crime, Mark Noseworthy, project lead; Steve Cotton, world director; Eric Osborne, community manager; M.E. Chung, social lead; and Michael Zak, art director; each is searching for the answer, and it means that change is on the horizon.



The reason? Many of the people that played *Destiny* never experienced how good the game could truly be, and that's a mistake Bungie doesn't plan on making twice.

"50 per cent [of players] never had the opportunity to experience *Destiny*'s most unique content. That's not good enough for *Destiny 2*," Smith smiles, explaining how he believed it was 'almost a miracle' that half of the player base were able to reach the requisite light and level cap, organise themselves into Fireteams, and actually complete a Raid scenario given how tough the game could make that journey.

For as addictive and ambitious as *Destiny* could be in its finest moments, it could also be a frustrating exercise in expectation management; an online-only shooter that could feel more like work than play, a second job in a strange and wondrous world. There was the daily nihilistic grind to contend with, and a litany of ever-increasing materials to farm and items to collect to hold pace with your fellow Guardians. All of this wrapped around a series of baffling design decisions and technical constraints that raised an eyebrow from day one – a frustrating part of the framework by the time *The Taken King* and *Rise Of Iron* had turned the general tide of discontent. »



> "We are expressly designing the game for it to be a fresh start for all players"
> **MARK NOSEWORTHY,** PROJECT LEAD

For the millions that have sunk their lives into *Destiny* since its launch in 2014, Raids, Strikes, PvP and that dopamine rush of acquiring new gear made it all worthwhile. For many others, the most challenging and engaging content was in plain sight but just out of arms reach, sealed behind an impenetrable barrier – a vault of glass built into the very fabric of the game, if you will. It became all too easy to feel like your time would be better spent elsewhere.

That's all set to change in *Destiny 2* and it begins with a series of radical changes to the basic pillars of the design. It's driven by a desire to turn the experience into a social hobby of sorts, where you aren't just sinking your time into the pursuit of exotics, but in pursuit of friendship and memorable experiences with your fellow Guardians.

"In *Destiny*, we had co-op activities that were designed to inspire friendship. Activities like the Nightfall, Raids and Trials; we deliberately kept them exclusive to dedicated groups of people because we believe that challenge is what fuels the memories between you and your lifelong friends," says M.E. Chung, the design lead charged with maintaining and improving Destiny's social dynamics. "We didn't think that matchmaking was a great solution because of just how toxic gaming communities can get when you throw strangers temporarily into these challenging experiences."

That's a sentiment that is echoed by Bungie's long serving community lead, Eric 'Urk' Osborne, who stands by the studio's decision to keep matchmaking separate from the game's endgame content. "If you put people in tense situations where success is determined by co-ordination, co-operation and camaraderie – where victory is dependant on people working together – [just] throwing people together didn't feel like a really good pairing," he tells us. But Osborne acknowledges that this attitude had to change as Bungie approached this sequel. Matchmaking and social play is built into the DNA of Bungie; if anybody could make this work, it was going to be them – it *had* to be. "We knew that we needed to open it up and find a way to bring players that couldn't form those groups together."

What was it that changed Bungie's mind? To put it quite simply: it was you. "We looked at the community as it is today," says Osborne on the process that pushed Bungie to put its faith in the players to ultimately lead *Destiny 2*'s design. "I think we have a uniquely positive and uniquely helpful player base... *Destiny* just wouldn't work with a toxic community." The community that rallied around *Destiny* is something of an anomaly for the multiplayer FPS – a market that is renowned for its open hostility. But the way we, the players, came together, forming our own Looking For Group services, working together to solve the toughest puzzles, rallying on social media and at gaming conventions the world over shocked Bungie. It was all the proof the studio needed that the community was capable of dealing with the challenge of merging solo and co-op players together in a way that *Destiny*'s 'shared-world shooter' concept had always promised but never quite managed to deliver.

"While we think that playing with a group of friends that you know and trust is the best way to experience the game, we made it inaccessible for some players to experience our end game content," admits Chung, "so we had an idea..."

That idea is called Guided Games, and it's perhaps the most important underlying system addition we could have ever hoped to see introduced into *Destiny 2*. As Eric Osborne will later tell us, it was born from Bungie "wanting to lean into the social promise of the game," introducing the increasingly isolated solo crowd to the "warm, welcoming and rich community of players that have embraced *Destiny* as a hobby, as something they have incorporated as a part of their lives."

Guided Games is, at its purest, an enhanced and player-driven matchmaking system for *Destiny 2* that will give all players the opportunity to find others to play with – should they want to, that is. It will open up features such as the six-person Raids and the three-person Nightfall Strikes to everybody. If you're a solo player looking for a new challenge, long after the campaign has wrapped, or simply a Guardian looking for people to fight alongside until your friends show up online a few hours later than agreed, it's designed to bring people together in a way that echoes the sensibilities and energy of the community that has formed around *Destiny*.

"It just felt like a bit of a no-brainer, like, how can we use our community's positivity to bring other people into some of the most challenging and rewarding content?" asks Osborne. "We saw the players going out and



NEW WORLDS



EARTH

1 Following the Cabal invasion of The Last City play will be shifting to new areas on Earth. Old Russia is being replaced with the European Dead Zone, the area in which the Memento and Widow's Court Crucible maps are set. It also happens to be the largest destination Bungie has ever built.



TITAN

2 One of the largest moons of Saturn, Titan is best described by art director Michael Zak as "an old human utopia" that is slowly "sinking into the ocean." This is already one of *Destiny 2*'s most impressive locales, an area that has no traditional landmass to traverse. It's also going to be home to Commander Zavela, the Titan Vanguard.



NESSUS

3 Everybody's favourite Vanguard, Cade-6, will be heading to Neesus after the Cabal attack on Earth, a planetoid that orbits the sun in the region of Uranus and Neptune. With Cade trapped in a portal, it'll be up to you to help the Hunter Vanguard escape and conquer the planet's lush outpost.



IO

4 This was the last place in the solar system that the Traveler touched before the collapse, a mysterious planet imbued with a strange energy. Ikora Rey, the Warlock Vanguard, has disappeared and taken to the moon's surface in search of answers. Expect to find some of the game's stranger missions here.



The changes made to weapon slots and sub-classes are felt more in The Crucible; working alongside the altered 4v4 setup it has certainly given Guardians a lot to think over. Expect a steep learning curve as you drop back into your flow.

Excited to try *Destiny 2* for yourself? There will be a closed beta happening this summer, shortly after E3 2017.

“DESTINY JUST WOULDN’T WORK WITH A TOXIC COMMUNITY”

ERIC OSBORNE,
COMMUNITY LEAD

Clans and Guided Games are exactly what *Destiny 2* needed. Not only does it bring the most exciting endgame content to all players, but it also works to help grow and strengthen the game’s incredible community.



forming their own LFG systems. We supported that on our forums, but ultimately having this functionality in the game makes it a more powerful tool; you can invoke it from the menu and just browse through some clans, and figure out which one is right for you in the moment.”

Ah, we got ahead of ourselves, didn’t we? Clans, they are a thing. Actually, they are an important thing that we have been patiently waiting for Bungie to properly implement into its games since *Halo 2*. Do you remember that? Where clan support was simply – as Osborne was keen to label it – “a sort of kludgy, hacky, second friends list.” This is an ‘evolution’ of what Bungie started back in 2004, and it’s how the studio is recognising and rewarding the socialites of *Destiny 2*. It’s a way for you to celebrate your friendships and share in even bigger, more meaningful, adventures with them under your own banner.

“You can play the game solo and have a blast. You can play the Red War, get through the campaign and have a great time, but we really want to slope the floor and get to a place where people can play together,” Noseworthy tells us. “That’s why we have been investing heavily into Guided Games and Clans, these things really go together.”

“Clans are essentially groups that people can join to play the game with other people, because not everybody has a friends list in real life full of other people that are also playing *Destiny*; what we want is to get to a place where everybody feels like it is worth joining a clan. Because there is no commitment, this isn’t a thing where you are signing up to agree to play the Raid every Sunday night for four hours, it’s just this group of people who I’m going to see almost as a second friends list. But the things I do now are going to contribute to group rewards and we are all going to get paid for that – membership should have its benefits – and that’s just cool.”

Clans will have a prominent place in the framework of *Destiny 2*. Not only are friends able to create their own, assembling an in-game roster of friends in the process, but you’ll also be able to decorate your Guardians with personalised banners and tags; every action you complete in the game will also feed into a wider rewards system, a tactic taken straight out of Blizzard’s *World Of Warcraft* playbook.

Guided Games and Clans will work hand in hand, making – one would hope – a better experience for all players. Unlike traditional matchmaking like you might find for *Crucible*, »

Guided Games relies on a Clan assembling a team and then going off in search of players to fill the gaps. Players running solo will be able to pull up a menu, check out a Clan's motto, interests and request to join in with the fun – it's a way of putting the most community-driven players together with those that are looking for a new home.

And better still, there's no commitment. If it isn't working out – for either side – then there's no penalty for ending the alliance. "In the case where you spend five minutes with a Clan, you thought their motto was cool, but it turns out they are kind of jerks, you can just bail out – there is no penalty, you don't have to suffer them," Osborne assures. "When you're in a Clan, you are inviting people into your home, so you treat them like a honoured guest; and if you're a guest, follow their rules and take your shoes off, and if anybody breaks any side of that pact you can just terminate that relationship with impunity."

Of course, no multiplayer community is perfect, and we still have concerns that the Guided Games system could be abused. We've all endured the pain of rolling through early LFG iterations in *World Of Warcraft* only to be booted out seconds before the loot roll or death of boss. Whether something like that can be avoided in *Destiny* is still unknown. "To be frank, the feature is still being developed, so beyond the top line I don't have a whole lot of information to share," says Osborne, though he assures us that this is something Bungie is cognisant of – it's a studio of MMO players after all.

It's these systems, Guided Games and Clans, that Bungie is using to help players find the fun of *Destiny 2*, breaking down the barriers to play that plagued its predecessor. It is also informing many of the other sweeping changes that are coming to the game. Having a fantastic social experience wouldn't be worth a damn if the rest of the experience hadn't been suitably altered and upgraded, and from what we've played, Bungie is certainly heading in the right direction. From changes to the weapons and sub classes, to small quality-of-life improvements, Bungie wants to make it as easy as possible for us to connect with the content.

"Today has been a bit mental," Osborne admits to us as a YouTuber in full Titan cosplay saunters past us. "I was literally sat next to the founder of the studio and Lance Reddick, and my heart was sitting in my throat. I was thinking, 'oh god, I hope they like this stuff' because you just never know how people are going to react. We've just tried to put stuff up on screen that we really believe in, and we hope people want to go on this journey with us."

His fear didn't stem from sitting sandwiched between Jason Jones and a man with one of the coolest voices in Hollywood, but because there was a lot here that could have sent fans into a frenzy. It's all well and good Bungie talking up the strength of its community as a design pillar, but that relationship goes both ways.

Any changes to the gameplay experience could have caused a literal riot. Stripping every Guardian of all but their sub-class configuration and visual confluence should have been a friction point waiting to happen. Thankfully, says Osborne, response has been better than expected. "It has actually been a lot more positive than I thought. I think people form affinities around their play style habits and the things that they love but, conversely, I also think that *Destiny 2* is an opportunity to start fresh and discover again. I think it's really important for a game like *Destiny*, that once you have learned it and mastered it, you need new things to make it feel fresh."

Destiny 2 exists in this weird space. While many of the changes seem small or even insignificant in isolation, when you look at them in the context of the broader experience it feels like a significant overhaul is being delivered. The studio isn't willing to call it a reboot, nor is it willing to look back and come to the same conclusion that we have: that *Destiny: Year One* was (in essence) an alpha, with the vastly improved Year Two offering a beta, all leading to this moment of a fully realised *Destiny* release, the game that we always knew it had the potential to be. Instead the team is content to look at *Destiny 2*'s design as a "blank slate" giving the team total autonomy to make changes without disrupting mechanics or systems that defined the original release.



■ *Destiny 2* will be launching for Xbox One and PS4 on 22 September 2017. While Bungie says it is putting its full weight behind the PC release of *Destiny 2*, it won't be ready for launch.

"We're able to say, 'so, what rules do we want to break?' That's one of the reasons we started everybody off at the same level [in *Destiny 2*]," says Noseworthy. "So we could say that we think this version of the game is superior, the best version of *Destiny* yet, so let's change all of these things. We are keeping some stuff the same, but are also making changes in places where we really think it is going to elevate the game."

The most obvious change to the way in which *Destiny 2* plays in the moment-to-moment comes via the altered weapon slots. There are now two primaries – one for kinetic (non-elemental) weapons, and another for energy (elemental). In essence, this means that you can now openly cycle between two hand cannons and feel like a total lone-ranger badass, should you be so inclined.

A by-product of destroying the conventional Primary, Secondary and Heavy weapon set-up is that the third slot is now used for Power weapons. This is where your favourite enemy-crippling, number-crunching guns live and breathe – such as the sniper rifle and shotgun. The result of this change feels inconsequential at first, but after a number of hours playing a slice of *Destiny 2*'s Campaign, Strike and Crucible offerings, it's clear that tactical approaches to combat are now more player-driven. It gives you the ability to have far more autonomy over your build and attacking options, increasing the scope and depth of the meta in ways we are yet to fully understand.

Getting a feel for the new configuration took some time. Kinetic weapons dealt out heavy doses of neutral damage to pull solid DPS numbers, while the Energy weapons let us play a little more strategically with our fellow Guardians, giving us the chance to manage crowds and tackle shielded enemies when the time called for it. It's also these slots where we were able to try out the new SMG weapon type, feeling like a souped-up auto rifle, more capable at close range. And then there was Bungie's new Power weapon, the grenade launcher. Destructive, awesome to wield and, well, say what you will about Bungie but they sure do have the best god damned audio design in videogames – this thing *sounds* immense. »







COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER IS CHANGING

HANDS-ON WITH THE CRUCIBLE

One of the more controversial changes Bungie has made for *Destiny 2* surrounds competitive multiplayer. The Crucible is now shifting from 6v6 to 4v4 – this is a change you will see reflected in all of the game's PvP modes. *Destiny 2*'s project lead, Mark Noseworthy, tells us it wasn't a decision the team made lightly, but one it does believe will make the game better for all.

"By reducing the team size to four it allows us to focus on making it more learnable, more watchable and more competitive – better for team play. As the teams get smaller, it becomes easier to get a Fireteam together who can co-ordinate together... we want to make it really easy to learn but difficult to master," he tells us, stopping just short of confirming that a desire to get into the eSports game was also a principle motivator.

We had the chance to put this to the test, getting hands-on with a brand new game mode called Countdown, set on an Earth map called Midtown. The mode sees two teams of four fight over bombs that you either need to arm or defend, assault or disarm – it felt very *Counter-Strike* inspired. The mode didn't feel like a perfect fit for *Destiny*, but the switch to 4v4 felt decisive, like a move made in earnest. It's also brought some other welcome changes to play as well.

"We've increased the time to kill, which allows a firefight to last a bit longer," Noseworthy continues. "And we've improved the HUD to better communicate more information, like names and locations of the map, or who has their Super [ready]. It all makes it more watchable as well. We are trying to make the PvP game great for people who like PvP, we are really focusing on that experience. We feel like the people who really like PvP are really going to dig this."



DESTINY HAS NEVER FELT THIS GOOD

HANDS-ON WITH THE PC VERSION OF DESTINY 2

There was some hope that the arrival of *Destiny 2* on PC would mean that Bungie would be overhauling its proprietary engine – reportedly the issue for many of the workflow and content problems that plagued the original release. Sadly, that doesn't seem to be the case, though project lead Mark Noseworthy is quick to tell us that it has been updated to take advantage of more powerful PC tech the team can now utilise.

"We've certainly made some updates to the engine for *Destiny 2*. We changed the renderer, and all the shaders in the game all use PBR (physically based rendering) so the metal looks like real metal and the characters just pop more, they all look amazing," he tells us. "We've increased AI count and a lot of the spaces are physically larger.

"We've expanded it for PC, trying to take advantage of that platform to its fullest, whether that's uncapped framerates, or different aspect ratios, or remappable controls… things that PC fans really want and that we really want! We are building the PC version of *Destiny* to feel like a PC version of the game, built by PC fans, period."

That shines through in what we played. After spending hundreds of hours on *Destiny* with a controller it took a little getting used to, but the upgrades elsewhere made up for any frustrations in that respect. The game looked stunning in 4K, it ran unbelievably smooth thanks to an upgraded framerate (*Destiny 2* is 30fps on console, uncapped on PC) and it just felt *right*. PC players will want to give *Destiny 2* a chance when it launches on Battle Net – in partnership with Blizzard – later this year, even if it is missing the 22 September release date.

"On your journey you're going to experience new missions and more cinematics than we've ever had in a Destiny game"

STEVE COTTON,
WORLD LEAD



Bungie is bringing a more substantial campaign to *Destiny 2*. With no more Grimoire cards, the studio has doubled down on narrative and storytelling.

Part of Bungie's overall thinking here was "how do we take that core *Destiny* experience and make it even better," says Noseworthy, leading into what might be one of *Destiny 2*'s strongest changes. "This is why we are introducing three brand new sub-classes into the game: with the Sentinel (Titan), the Arkstrider (Hunter) and the Dawnblade (Warlock); we are just trying to advance the action game."

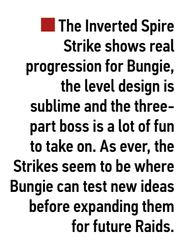
The only one of these three new sub-classes we were able to try was Dawnblade, which replaces the Sunsinger as the Warlock's solar subclass, and it felt fantastic. If Bungie intended on making us feel even more super heroic in this world then it is certainly achieving that goal, especially when you factor in each class's innate abilities – such as the Hunters now being able to use a combat dodge to avoid incoming attacks at a moment's notice in an impressive fashion. The classes feel even more distinct as a result of these changes, giving players scope to try out new tactics and play styles. It's worth noting that the strength, intellect and discipline stats present in vanilla *Destiny* have also been removed – replaced with armour, agility and recovery as your base stat mutators – and suddenly you're confronted with an experience that's far more accessible and manageable for those that don't have the time or desire to crawl through r/DestinyTheGame for optimal build suggestions.

It is a shame, admittedly, that Bungie won't be adding in a brand new class – the Titan, Warlock and Hunter are a great trio, but wearing a little thin. Could new classes come down the line in future updates or expansions? We asked 12 developers on the ground; they either laughed it off expertly or rolled with the classic "no comment" as an Activision PR rep looked on nervously from the shadows. Can't blame a mag for tryin'.

"In *Destiny 2*, there's more to do than in any game we've ever made at Bungie," says Steve Cotton, charged with leading the game's world design. We're inclined to believe him. "We start with a brand new story, the Red War campaign. It's going to send you across the solar system and back, to all new places. On your journey you're going to experience new missions and more cinematics than we've ever had in a *Destiny* game."



Of all the small changes that has got us truly excited are the changes coming to the world map. It will now be a useful aid in your adventure, highlighting points of interest, leading you on treasure hunts and even signalling where/when public events are happening.



The Inverted Spire Strike shows real progression for Bungie, the level design is sublime and the three-part boss is a lot of fun to take on. As ever, the Strikes seem to be where Bungie can test new ideas before expanding them for future Raids.



The two biggest complaints levied at Bungie over the past three years have concerned content and narrative, in so much as it had little of either. This is something the team is quick to address right out of the gate; *Destiny 2* is doubling down on storytelling, with Bungie delivering, by all accounts, a linear FPS campaign with a full beginning, middle and end. That sound you just heard? That was *Halo* fans the world over euphorically cheering.

But it's the most inconsequential changes – the ones you'd need a microscope to find, and weren't on full display during our time with *Destiny 2* – that have us truly excited. There are small quality-of-life improvements being made to the exploration portion of the game, fixing so many of the little frustrations that have existed in the game since launch. "We are building worlds that you are going to want to visit, again and again," Cotton tells us, and that starts with ensuring the worlds are "so much better than just doing patrols."

Now, you can go directly from one planet to another – launch all of the new activities – without first going into orbit. You just open the director, pick your new destination and go straight to it – it's all about unhiding the fun, after all. "There are still patrols, but now you'll find more ambient encounters, there are chests for you to find, and public events that have heroic objectives," Cotton says, adding, "and treasure maps for you to find and follow, Lost Sectors for you to discover… just choose a landing zone and the rest is up to you."

This is all tied to a total overhaul of the map, made in service of *Destiny 2* offering a more traditional MMO structure to its mission design and visual communication. Public events now show up on your map, marking when and where they are going live. NPCs, whether you find them out in the wilderness or at The Farm (the social hub, replacing the now destroyed Tower, in the European Dead Zone), will be actively handing you quests and expect a response to move their stories along; they will even "mark your map with mysterious locations to discover, called Lost Sectors," Cotton teases, "and when you descend into these dungeons you are going to find a cash of treasure and a boss that holds the key."

Bungie is eager to prove that it is capable of delivering a game with enough content to satisfy and engage players week-to-week until the expansions start dropping, but we still have concerns. The lack of transparency from the studio on the regularity and due date of content was a huge point of contention over *Destiny*'s turbulent three years. The game's problems behind the scenes are known now, and we wanted assurances Bungie would approach this sequel a little more openly.

"People just want a little bit more awareness and want to be able to look into the future and know what's coming," Osborne agrees, keenly aware of what his community expects of Bungie. "Our goal is to provide a road map post-launch; obviously, right now, we are just focused on our first step right out of the gate, but you can already see that we will have expansions coming and if you look at the art you'll probably get a little hint of what's to come.

"What we don't want to do is come out and tell people, 'hey you should expect this,' and then when we don't give it to them and we look like assholes," he says, adding, "we communicate with millions of people who love the game and all have different opinions on what we should do and we try to stand in the middle of that and create the best experience that we possibly can. I hear you, man; we can always do better. It is definitely something that we are cognisant of, we can always do better."

Bungie *can* always do better. It's a company that has never failed to push the envelope on what we thought was possible with gaming, and *Destiny 2* is no exception. All of the changes, the tweaks and the updates to the core *Destiny* experience are in service of Bungie finding the fun. To make it feel less like work and more like play across the entire breadth of the experience, instead of in isolated pockets. *Destiny 2* is coming together as the game we expected its predecessor to be, the FPS that could define an entire generation. Perhaps Luke Smith puts it best when summarising where *Destiny 2* excels: "This is all about getting into the action faster. We want to remove as many barriers as we can between your gun and the enemy's face."



NEW GAME, NEW WORLD, SAME TRILOGY



CREATIVE ASSEMBLY SEEKS TO CONQUER THE DIFFICULT SECOND ACT SYNDROME

It's often said that a novelist's second book, a band's second album or a director's sophomore film are the most difficult to create and find success with. On the first release newcomers tend to be given the benefit of any doubt, audiences clambering to feel part of the discovery of a new maverick and innovator. Come the second release, though, expectation can weigh heavy, audiences are less forgiving and failure is common. Think The Stroke's second album, *Room On Fire*, or Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales*, the movie he released after his feature film debut *Donnie Darko*.

Videogames are not immune to this phenomenon. *BioShock 2*, whilst an admirable effort, failed to generate the same spectacle and philosophical debate as the original, while the likes of the *Devil May Cry 2*, *Deus Ex: Invisible War* and *Dragon Age II* all struggled to live up to the quality of their predecessors. The less said about *The Force Unleashed II* the better.

Total War: Warhammer II has arguably a more challenging task than most sequels given that it is the second release in a series designed from the get-go as a trilogy. UK-based developer Creative Assembly has to demonstrate that progress has been made in comparison to the original, as well as set up expectations that the finale is going to be something to further savour. In many ways, then, *Warhammer II* is the essential glue holding the whole enterprise together.

Game director Ian Roxburgh believes that his team is in the best possible position to deliver on expectations, in large part because of the fact that this release is treated as a separate game in its own right, as opposed to only working as part of the overall trilogy.

"We do very much develop each game as separate projects," explains Roxburgh, who is sat opposite us in a small meeting room within Creative Assembly's Horsham head office. The view out of the window is either of a roundabout or a dual carriageway. Horsham is one of those places in which general tones of concrete grey and dirty brick brown are so overwhelming that it's almost impossible to remember anything else about it. »





"For sure, we don't see *Total War: Warhammer II* as us working on the second third of one big game. They are seen as separate games internally, but they are designed with a view to making sure all of the content of each game fits into what has come and what is going to come. It's a big plan of three games and DLC coming together and we want this to be a true sequel in its own right."



The Lizardmen are, arguably, the most visually impressive race to yet appear in a *Total War: Warhammer* game. They make for a great excuse to bring the camera up close and personal.

This being a *Total War* game, there are certain elements that are as present and correct here as they were in 2000 when the series' debut, *Shogun: Total War,* appeared on the strategy gaming scene. Turn-based navigation, diplomacy and exploration are the bread and butter of the campaign, different factions beginning their quest for victory in different regions of an enormous map.

Controlling more of the map increases your potential to gather resources, set up trading alliances with others and grasp a better understanding of your environment; all of which increases your power and ability to enact your will upon others. Where *Total War* differs from the variety of grand strategy offered by the likes of *Civilization* or *Endless Space* is in its provision of real-time, large-scale battles in which you command every little action of your troops.

Warhammer II, and any advances it makes in expanding what was offered in the original, is also going to be viewed within the context of *Total War* as a whole. In these terms, a number of the changes being made here could rightly be considered as surprisingly radical for a franchise with so many long-term fans to appeal to. It's all too easy for aged franchises to simply regurgitate what has previously been successful, so it's heartening to see a more progressive attitude being taken here.

The new campaign map, for instance, features a huge, stationary tornado at its centre known as the Great Vortex. This plays a significant role in delivering and guiding *Warhammer II*'s narrative and has the potential to impact greatly how you might choose to approach the campaign in comparison to previous *Total War* games.

"There are a lot of gameplay ideas built in and around the Vortex," says Roxburgh. "Essentially, it's a race between the factions to control it, and the incentive for us designing it in that way is to bring more narrative elements into the game in a non-linear way. It's not a race in the sense that everyone is trying to get a specific point or achieve a specific thing before everyone else; it's more open than that. You can sabotage the AI, you can slow down their progress and they're going to do that to you and the AI will do that to each other."

In other words, having the Vortex as a central point of interest and conflict adds to the volume and variety of reasons for factions to interact with one another. This stands in stark contrast to how previous games in the franchise, including *Warhammer 1*, have operated. Traditionally, *Total War* games have been about determined, focused conquest and working hard to take control of as much of the map as possible in as short a time as possible.

Roxburgh continues: "With the Vortex we wanted to address what has been as issue for *Total War* for a long time: which is that when you've gotten to a point where you control a third of the whole map then you know you're going to win and the tension is lost from that point to the end. Players just go through the motions once they reach that point and some even stop playing because they know they've already won."

It's possible in *Warhammer II* to control a huge chunk of the campaign map and yet still lose if you let your enemies harness the power of the Vortex. In this way the design team is able to make sure the campaign stays interesting up until the final moments by forcing players to concentrate and think about what they're doing all the way up the point of eventual victory or defeat. Switch off at the end and you're going to come unstuck, even if you control most of the world.

THE RACES OF WARHAMMER



HIGH ELVES

A major faction in *Total War: Warhammer II* and likely the first most players will encounter, the High Elves are a versatile race, designed to ease players into the game. They offer versatility across a vast array of unit types and movement proficiencies, perfect for beginners.



DARK ELVES

Locked in a millennia long war with the High Elves, expect this race to offer an elegant and agile way to tackle play – although this comes with a cost of major fragility on the field. If you want a challenge and a counter-point to the High Elf story, the Dark Elf campaign should do the trick.



LIZARDMEN

The Lizardmen are without question one of the coolest armies in all of *Warhammer* – because, honestly, who doesn't love dinosaurs? What the Lizardmen lack in cavalry options and large army capabilities, they make up for with incredible defensive and magical prowess.



SKAVEN

While this one isn't confirmed officially, we are making an educated guess that the army will make an appearance in the final release. Known for their weak offensive capabilities, countered by huge armies, they should be a great addition to play.

■ Get your tactics right and by setting up skirmishes in which your own unit type has a distinct advantage over the enemy and you are able to end the fight without personal damage.

The challenge in implementing this kind of game-changing concept resides in doing so without impeding the enjoyment of those players who would prefer a conservative development approach to a progressive one. Veteran *Total War* players are veterans for a reason and some will not want to see those reasons undermined.

"If you want to concentrate instead on building up your armies and beating whatever is in front of you then you can do that," promises Roxburgh when asked whether it is still possible to win the campaign by focusing solely on the form of conquest that has worked in previous games. "That sandbox concept is still there for you to explore and even though we've added the Vortex we don't want to force players into any linear route that locks you into having to play a certain way or do a certain thing in order to win."

There are a number of other points of interest littered about the campaign map, too. A flyover of the continent reveals hidden treasures, shipwrecks to explore and AI-controlled sub-factions to defeat or ally yourself with. What's immediately clear is that there's a far greater quantity of these kinds of extra curricular activities than were available in *Warhammer 1*.

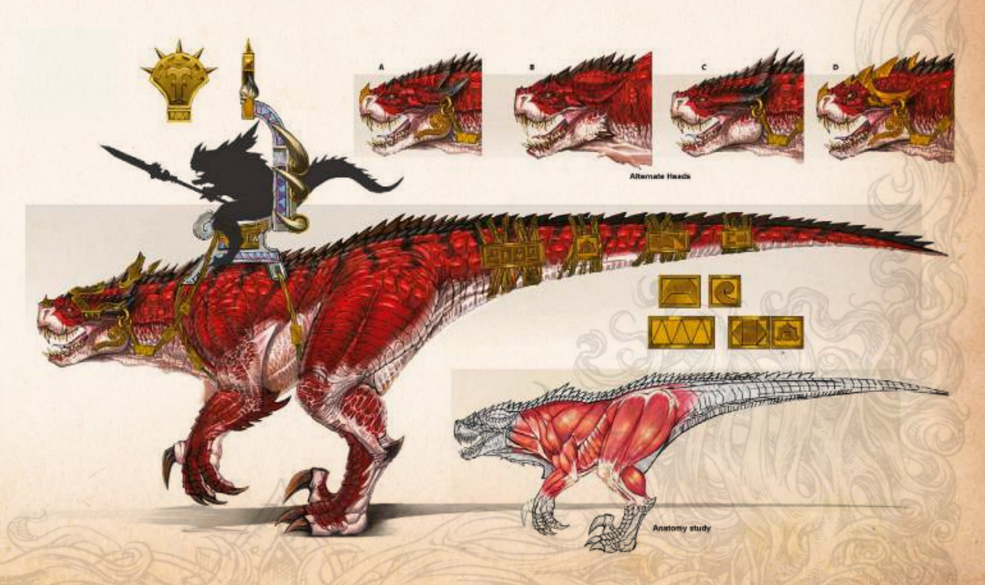
Such elements represent an excellent chance for Creative Assembly to demonstrate its knowledge, appreciation and respect for the *Warhammer* lore that is at the foundation of the content presented here. As much as this is a *Total War* game, it's also a vehicle for the *Warhammer* universe and that has to be delivered in a way that is meaningful to fans of the table top game – whether they're hitherto interested in videogames or not. »





" Playing as a different race really does feel like you're playing a different game





A Grand Campaign

BRINGING THE ENTIRE WARHAMMER UNIVERSE TOGETHER

One of the more ambitious goals the *Total War: Warhammer* trilogy has set itself is to eventually provide a space in which all of its factions seen across all three games, including accompanying DLC, are playable together and against one another in what Creative Assembly is currently calling the 'Grand Campaign'. The idea here is to recreate the table top game in the sense that you will be able to pick any faction from the *Warhammer* universe and take it into battle within the structure of *Total War*.

That plan is coming into action with the release of *Warhammer II*, the Grand Campaign supporting the use of the four new factions alongside those already available today.

"If you own both games then the Grand Campaign is free, so it's a win-win for us in terms of giving that to the fans," grins game director Ian Roxburgh. "We're fans of *Warhammer* too and we want to play a campaign that involves all of these races.

"We are in a position that allows us to craft that ultimate game that combines two, and then eventually three, games into one. We get to make it and then play it, which is great."

More than any other planned feature, it's the Grand Campaign that most obviously links the three games into a single, cohesive trilogy. As ever when you're dealing with so many different factions and their skill trees and race-specific traits, the eventual quality of this ambitious campaign is going to come down to gameplay balancing, balancing and more balancing.

> "We don't want to force players into any linear route that locks you into having to play a certain way"





The Lizardmen are ruled by an Aztec-variant of Jabba the Hutt, meaning you can't help but obey him.



For those with the relevant knowledge, there's plenty of opportunity to appreciate and indulge in the *Warhammer* lore underpinning everything from the environmental design and campaign narrative to the factions and individual characters.

The Great Vortex itself, for instance, is taken from that lore. High Elves, one of four playable races here, created it long before the events depicted in *Warhammer II* as a means to overcome an invasion of Chaos known as the Great Cataclysm. The plan worked and the Vortex blasted the Chaos out of the New World that the High Elves inhabit and is presented here.

A period of calm followed the banishing of the Chaos until, for reasons unknown, an event in the heavens destabilised the Vortex and presented opportunities to exploit it. It's here that *Warhammer II*'s narrative begins, with some of the playable races working to use the destabilisation for their own ends and others trying to restore the prior equilibrium.

Three of the four playable races have been confirmed: High Elves, Dark Elves and Lizardmen. It is expected, although not confirmed, that the Skaven are the remaining faction – not only because they were the most vocally requested amongst fans after their absence in *Warhammer 1* but also because a teaser video clip bolted onto the end of an early trailer for the game suggests they appear here.

"The mechanics of the campaign itself are different between races in terms of the economy, the tech, the skill trees, the battle mechanics and everything else," describes Roxburgh. "We've been able to confidently develop the idea of making them play so differently because of how well it worked in *Warhammer 1* with the races we had there. Playing as a different race really does feel like you're playing a different game."

High Elves, for example, can make use of a system dubbed 'Intrigue at the Courts' whereby they're able to gain influence of a sort not available to others. This influence can be spent on recruiting powerful lords to help in both battle and on the campaign map, or it can be spent on getting more involved in altering diplomatic relations between other factions. You can use your influence to affect your own standing with the rest of the world or you could try and set two rivals against one another with a view to weakening them both without you having to risk Elven blood.

Lizardmen operate very differently, their unique ability being the 'Geomantic Web' that allows cities to operate at a higher level when they're linked together through a magical energy force inherent to the world. The stronger the links you have between sites the more powerful the commandants you can enact across your kingdom become. Those commandants revolve around everything from improving an area's defence to improving public order within your settlements. How you act via your commandants is determined by what kind of civilisation you want to create.

There are other mechanics that are specific to each race, but those described are some of the more overt and immediately obvious. Additionally, you can choose a legendary lord to bring into your faction and this had a marked effect on your available traits and abilities, as Roxburgh makes clear:

"High Elves, for example, have Tyrion as a legendary lord. He is very good at using his core army and is more of a military leader type who really cares about the High Elves as a race. Then you've got Teclis who is more »





It's clear that a huge effort has gone into making sure battle arenas are grander and more aesthetically striking than those in the previous game. The cut-scene that introduces this battle between High Elves and Lizardmen is designed specifically to highlight that effort.

worried about the world as a whole and has a completely different set of strengths and weaknesses.

"At the start of a campaign, then, you've got a lot of different things to think about and confront depending on how you want to act. The character development and the way you interpret the narrative is different depending on whether you choose Teclis or Tyrion, even though you're playing as the High Elves in both cases. You've really got eight races to play as because each of the four has these two legendary lords and that greatly increases the replayability."

All of these lords and factions come together in the real-time battles, too, of course. A great deal of effort has gone into making sure the battle maps themselves are as much of a step up visually as the overall campaign map is. A short cut-scene prior to a fight between High Elves and Lizardmen acts as an excuse to show off these enhancements via a camera flyover, with a dramatic sky, ancient shrines and the elaborate character models all given screen time before the battle begins. It's a great way to raise the stakes and generate excitement prior to you giving any orders, seeing the terrain and units in the field.

Visual impact is a theme that permeates much of the design tweaks made here, with a real focus placed on making this an easier game to learn as well as be wowed by.

"The learning experience needs to be focused on understanding new ideas," states Roxburgh. "The fun in *Total War* is about coming up with strategies and making choices about how you get to where you want to go, it isn't about trying to work out how to interact with the game in order to achieve that. Those are the sorts of barriers we're trying to cut out.

"We've added a lot to the UI in *Warhammer II* that wasn't in the first game and that helps a lot in navigating the world and the gameplay ideas available to you. In previous *Total War* games the building element, for example, has been like a spread sheet at times. In *Warhammer II*, however, the building browser shows you all of your available buildings and you can see unit cards next to those so you know what you need to construct in order to gain access to that specific unit."

Warhammer II is setting out to improve not just this trilogy but *Total War* as a whole. Just how much of the *Warhammer*-specific content can be transferred into the realm of human history that this franchise has otherwise focused on will be interesting to observe. What's clear is that the adoption of the *Warhammer* license has acted as a prompt for the design team to rethink how *Total War* could and should work.



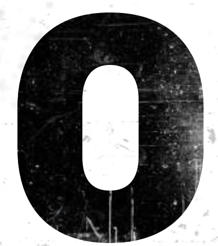
The High Elves' sense of nobility and structure is communicated beautifully through their core concept designs.



> YOU GET A REAL ADRENALINE BURST, NOT BECAUSE YOU MIGHT DIE BUT BECAUSE YOU MIGHT WIN

THIRTY MINUTES, ONE SURVIVOR, NO RULES

GAMES™ HEADS INSIDE THE DEVELOPMENT OF **PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS** WITH INDUSTRY TRENDSETTER BRENDAN GREENE



One hundred players parachute out into a large, sprawling world with nothing but the clothes on their back, unarmed and unprepared for the brutality that is about to befall them. Every moment from that point onwards is a desperate scramble for survival; the line between life and death is easily blurred in battle royal. You are free to pick and choose your own path, compelled to scavenge for weapons, ammunition, attachments, armour and items that are located randomly throughout the surrounding area, hiding in the long-abandoned buildings and out in the wilds of Erangel – mastery over on-site procurement has never felt so satisfying. At any point in time you may find yourself surrounded by 360 degrees of gunfire, or in a position to aggressively capitalise on another player's misfortunes. In this world, even the smallest of successes is often contrasted by the harshest of failures.

And you will be forced to fight for your life. It isn't just expected that you'll run into other players, it is inevitable. The longer you escape death, the more you will be forced to adapt; altering your tactics and priorities as the boundaries of the map contract and contort around you, shrinking until the final players are left within touching distance of one another. Every decision made, by each of the players remaining at any given time, will have an effect on your chance of survival. It's an experience that fosters truly emergent drama, manufacturing moments of utter elation and crushing disappointment within seconds of one another. This is *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*. But to truly understand where this game is going – and its true potential – you need to understand where and how this digital blood sport came to be.

Ask Brendan 'PlayerUnknown' Greene what it is that's made his debut game so successful and you'll find yourself sitting through a rare moment of silence with the 41-year-old creative. It's an understandable reaction for the talkative modder, who has now found himself thrust into the spotlight as creative director at Bluehole Inc. After all, a lot has happened since 24 March 2017. That's a day that will be forever etched into the memory of Greene, the moment that *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* exited beta and entered Steam's divisive Early Access program, immediately enrapturing the PC gaming and Twitch communities.

But why is this important, let alone impressive, enough to be worth discussing – games are rolled into Early Access all of the time, right? Well, it probably has something to do with *Battlegrounds* selling two million copies in just six weeks. Hell, it made 11 million dollars and secured 150,000 concurrent viewers on Twitch over its *launch week* – topping the Steam charts with ease, threatening to eclipse titans such as *CS: GO* and *League Of Legends* as the number one viewed game on the streaming platform. These are the kind of figures that most publishers would kill for in today's competitive market – figures that many games outright fail to secure in a lifetime, let alone ahead of final release – but this isn't just some mere industry irregularity; *Battlegrounds* is breaking all of the rules.

Perhaps that's because Greene didn't know any of them existed in the first place. "I don't consider myself a gamer," the *Battlegrounds* creator admits to **games™**, speaking out of his office in Seoul, South Korea. "I've never played a *Zelda*; I think I played *Metal Gear Solid* for about five minutes before I got bored," he continues, breaking our heart with every fresh admission. "The last *Call Of Duty* I played was *Modern Warfare*, the first one, I think. They are great games but they are not my type of game… that kind of stuff just doesn't excite me as a player."

Greene is quick to list a litany of triple-A action games and shooters that never quite appealed to him, their familiar frameworks, cyclical multiplayer design and safe foundations leaving him unchallenged and unsatisfied. How does that old saying go? If you don't like something, do it yourself and do it better; that's easier said than done in this industry, especially as Greene never had any »



Battlegrounds, unlike rival battle royal experiences such as *The Culling*, *ARK: Survival Evolved* and *H1Z1*, is based in reality. Greene still holds the *ArmA III* foundation close to his heart, bringing the same depth of loot and gameplay systems to his all-new shooter release.

ambition to be a game designer. Instead he worked hard to make ends meet as a photographer, graphic designer and, sometimes, a DJ – living his life as a freelancer out of his native Ireland and, in an instance that kickstarted this entire endeavour, Brazil, letting his heart lead him to a foreign land.

Seeking out a new beginning can be a powerful motivator and it pushed Greene into the path of an emerging new genre to find solace, and that genre was survival games; unscripted and player-driven, in a way that no other competitive shooters at the time were or could be. "That's when I discovered *DayZ*," he tells us. "It reignited the fire for gaming in me. I love the non-linear nature of it; I love that you can do whatever the hell you want, that there were no rules. I thought it was a really cool concept."

Part of Greene's initial inspiration for *Battlegrounds* – and its two predecessors, *H1Z1: King Of The Kill* and *Battle Royale* – emerged out of the modding community that formed around *DayZ* back in 2012. *Survivor GameZ* is a notable example, heavily inspired by the brutal life or death action of Koushun Takami's novel *Battle Royale*. But Greene set his sights on something purer as he looked to create his own mod, stripping away the game's zombie antagonists and invasive survival systems in an effort to create what was, essentially, "a pure PvP based version of *DayZ*," he says, adding with a laugh, "I thought that would be a good idea."

He wasn't wrong. "I really wanted to play a game that challenged me as a player. I wanted to create a game that was based in randomness, where you never knew what you were going to get or do… to test a player in the moment, rather than testing their knowledge of the map or of spawn points. That's why I created the *Battle Royale* mod, because it's the type of game that I wanted to play."

Battlegrounds, as it exists today, is, essentially, the absolute distillation of the gameplay and system structures Greene first established back in 2013 with the release of *Battle Royale* – his first foray into game design. While Greene only had limited experience in programming, he took what knowledge he did have and began applying it, first to a modded *DayZ* sever, and later to a full mod of his own, getting his hands dirty in the source code of *ArmA III* to bring *Battle Royale* support to the standalone edition of *DayZ*. *Battle Royale* quickly became popular. So popular, in fact, that it's still active to this day. "I still pay for the servers out of my own pocket, because I never believed in asking for donations for a mod," he says, noting that he pays out $2000 a month to keep *Battle Royale* alive. "But I don't care because I wouldn't be where I am today without *ArmA III*. It's my way of giving back to the community."

Greene wanted to create a game that tested more than your reaction speeds, where skill was more than the DPI of your mouse. He wanted to prove there was more to competitive shooters than who could fire first, eschewing the standard respawn cycle of traditional FPS games for an experience that made you value every moment you were alive – taking the '30 seconds of fun' mantra that games like *Halo* popularised and eradicating it from existence. All of this done in an effort to create an experience based wholly in the moment, formed around active decision-making, item acquisition, trust, bargaining and betrayal. In *Battlegrounds* there are no real winners, only survivors. Your ability to outsmart and outmanoeuvre your opponents is just as important (if not more so) than merely outgunning them.

It's because of this electric mix of styles and ideas – not to mention the title's huge popularity on Twitch – that *Battle Royale* quickly caught the attention of Sony Online Entertainment (now known as Daybreak Games). It prompted the studio to bring Greene in as a consultant as it looked to adapt *Battle Royale* for *H1Z1*, introducing a brand new game mode into play called King Of The Kill. "John Smedley followed me on Twitter and he sent me a DM saying, 'hey, I'm John Smedley the CEO of Sony Online, we should talk!' and then the next week he flew me out to San Diego," he laughs, still somewhat bemused by the entire event.

"They saw that we had been working on [*Battle Royale*] for a few years, [and] despite being one of the most popular game modes on Twitch, I wasn't making any money from it. But they wanted to give me a chance to get something back from this game mode, so they set up that license deal… modders don't usually get a chance like that. And the rest is history."

As time went on, Greene and SOE's vision for *H1Z1* began to shift in different directions. "I became less and less involved," he considers, although it wasn't that the studio was doing a bad job with it, he continues, it just wasn't the evolution of *Battle Royale* as he had envisioned it. "What I wanted for the game mode wasn't necessarily what they wanted for the game mode… the mod was my baby, but this was theirs."

By January 2015, *H1Z1: King Of The Kill* was ready to launch into Early Access, but it didn't take long for Greene to set his sights on a new challenge. All it took was an email from Bluehole producer Changhan Kim to get the ball rolling, inviting Greene to make the move to South Korea and begin work on his own original IP. "It wasn't that hard of a decision," he says of leaving *H1Z1: King Of The Kill* behind, "because [SEO] has done a great thing with it, they have created a great game. Then Bluehole contacted me and I got the chance to make my own game."

> "H1Z1 IS A GREAT ARCADE SHOOTER AND ARMA III IS A GREAT MILITARY SIMULATION, BUT I WANTED TO CREATE SOMETHING THAT WAS SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE"

This is where the *Battlegrounds* story enters into its next chapter. Greene was given the option to take *Battle Royale* to the next level; unrestricted by the ageing *ArmA III* engine and its art assets, this would be a fresh start, built from scratch in Unreal. "I wanted to make a game that sat nicely between *H1Z1* and *ArmA III*," he says, giving an insight into what lessons he had learned over his four years of tinkering and fine-tuning his concept.

"*H1Z1* is a great arcade shooter and *ArmA III* is a great military simulation, but I wanted to create something that was somewhere in the middle. Something that has the weapon physics and all the stuff like that which defined *ArmA III* but still had that ease of play that you see in *H1Z1*."

That's easier said than done. Greene, as we mentioned before, never had any aspirations of being a game designer. In fact, when we ask if he did, he manages to squeeze in a "oh god no" through the splutters of laughter. But that's *Battlegrounds*, a game that works because it breaks all of the rules. "[Bluehole] understood that I came at this with no design experience in the games industry. It has given me a lot of freedom; because I don't know what's possible, I don't know what isn't," he says with the same creative spirit that we've seen exhibited from the likes of Markus 'Notch' Persson and Eric 'ConcernedApe' Barone in the past. "I can suggest stuff and the technical director will look at me with very angry eyes," he continues, laughing, "Sometimes they look at me and they say, 'that's not the way that you design games' and I'm like, 'well, I know that, but it works!'"

Battlegrounds, as it exists in Early Access today, is relatively simple to grasp in spite of its challenge. Finding the balance between simulation and accessibility is something that developers have struggled with for over a decade, and this release is no stranger to this divide. In a game where every experience is player-driven, that »



You never know what you're going to get in *Battlegrounds* as all of the loot is randomised. The first few minutes, as you desperately search for weapons (and the compatible ammo and attachments) are incredibly tense – a geared-up rival could appear at any time.



At the beginning of the game, 100 players parachute out across the map to the destination of their choosing. This is the first big decision you'll make in the game and it's an important one.















ESCAPING EARLY ACCESS

Unlike the litany of survival games that have spent (what seems like) an eternity manoeuvring through Early Access to little avail, Bluehole is eager to capitalise on *Battlegrounds*' momentum and get the game out as a 'full' release sooner rather than later. "We have a goal of six months, that's what we are aiming for," says Greene, noting that the team is now hard-pressed to work on optimisation and balancing. "We are really starting to analyse the data and optimise the game to improve performance, that's where our focus is… to really balance the game, to make it as good as physically possible."

Greene notes that Bluehole is eager to iron out the wrinkles of the experience, improving weapon feel, the randomisation of loot and turning/aiming circles, whilst still bringing new features to the game. "We have two new maps being planned at the moment, they are in very early phases of development," he teases, adding, "We are adding new vehicles, and we are trying to add new weapons in every month, so we do plan to add a lot more content in [before launch]."

But that isn't all the team has set its sights on, with Greene going as far as to promise that Bluehole is eager to bring *Battlegrounds* to console, as soon as it can find the time. "We plan to bring it to consoles, for sure. We haven't announced our plans yet, but we have an Xbox dev kit here in the office and we have a version of the game running on it," he reveals. "Not very well at the moment…" he adds, laughing, "but that *will* improve over the coming months."



Battlegrounds is best enjoyed with friends but it's also a riot in solo play. The game supports various lobby configurations, letting either solo, duo or four-player groups drop into rooms to face off against teams of equal size. Four-player games are an Ubisoft E3 trailer come to life.







Battlegrounds has become one of the year's biggest success stories. Not only has it rocketed up the Steam charts, but it has also become a hit on Twitch, with the compelling player-driven narratives that emerge over games enticing audiences.



can lead to frustrating encounters. Spending ten minutes gearing up – tentatively crawling through long stretches of forest or creeping through towns in an effort to avoid detection – only for a group to show up in a military jeep and blast you away, or worse still, for someone to bump into you accidentally and beat you to death with a frying pan. But then that's all part of it; it's what makes the game so exciting as a vehicle for storytelling. It's the anecdotes that are created through play – the opportunity to spin a story that sounds too good to be true – that keeps players coming back, that keeps the spectators engaged.

Greene compares *Battlegrounds* to poker. "Everybody starts with the same deck on the table," he'll say, but even if you're dealt a terrible hand that doesn't mean there isn't still a chance of you making it down to the final table. "Get into that final 20 [player] bracket and it starts giving you real adrenaline. In a lot of other multiplayer games, you know what is going to happen, so there are no real surprises there. But in *Battlegrounds* there is that very real element of surprise, and an element of tension that exists constantly until you die. Once you get into the final ten, you'll start to get a real adrenaline burst, not because you might die but because you might *win*, and you get that feeling every time."

Meeting other players in game, as few and far between as it can be, delivers a real honest-to-god euphoric high. Knowing that the next decision you make could be your last creates a unique kind of tension for a multiplayer shooter, and it's difficult to come by experiences like this in gaming. It's this element of the game, Green believes, that makes *Battlegrounds* not only great to play, but to watch too. "I think there is a good balance of up-time and down-time. Because [*Battlegrounds*] is a little bit slower than *H1Z1*, at least as a starting point, there is just a lot more time for fun and games… you feel a connection to the characters because you see them level up, essentially, during a round. When you're fully kitted out people are excited to see how long you will last… there's a little bit more time for people to find their own fun here. Again, it's just giving people the freedom to do whatever the hell they want."

The success of *Battlegrounds* feels unprecedented, but spend a few hours romping across its map and it becomes incredibly easy to understand the appeal. Not that the success is getting to Greene or dampening his resolve to create the ultimate *Battle Royale* experience. He still has the same humble ambitions that he had when he set out on this adventure. "I'm convinced my family thought I was going to be out living on the street," he tells us, recalling the experience of moving back to Ireland from Brazil, struggling to find work as a photographer. But Greene's story is proof of how videogames can change lives; that all it takes is one good idea to change everything. "Then the Sony thing happened… my family are just delighted, they are so proud. My parents aren't doing so well with money at the moment but now I'm able to help them out. They helped me so much back then, when I was just starting the mod, and it's great to be able to finally help them back."



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SURVIVING EARLY ACCESS

UNDER CONSTRUCTION – UNDER CONSTRUCTION – UNDER CONSTRUCTION

FROM BAREBONES TITLES THAT HAVE BLOSSOMED OVER TIME, TO FORMER BIG-HITTERS BLIGHTED BY UNDELIVERED PROMISES, WE SURVEY THE PROSPECTS OF THE BIGGEST GAMES IN EARLY ACCESS



DAYZ

DEVELOPER: BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE

TIME IN EARLY ACCESS 3 YEARS 6 MONTHS

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

You start with nothing and roam a zombie-infested Soviet-inspired landscape searching for food, water, medical supplies, clothes and weapons. Those shambling zombies aren't the real danger, however. With permadeath meaning you can lose everything in the blink of an eye, the game is known for adrenaline-inducing encounters with other players who might be after your stuff, leading to bluffs, betrayals, stand-offs, shoot outs, and, occasionally, collaboration.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

Starting off as a mod for ARMA 2 before its move to Early Access, there were big changes in *DayZ*'s early days as it garnered the kind of attention *Battlegrounds* is now enjoying. Fast-forward to 2017, however, and it's lost all that momentum. With creator Dean Hall leaving the project in 2014 and its fanbase losing patience with missed milestones and a snail-like rate of progress, *DayZ*'s prospects look bleak.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 3/10





OXYGEN NOT INCLUDED

DEVELOPER: KLEI ENTERTAINMENT

TIME IN EARLY ACCESS 0 YEARS 1 MONTHS

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Described by developer Klei as a "space colony simulator", the idea of the game is to build a liveable base for your colony inside an asteroid. What makes it interesting is that as well as managing scarce resources like oxygen and food, you have to be mindful of the psychological state of your colonists, who all have different ways of responding to stress.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

Given that this has only just hit Early Access, it hasn't had a chance to change. However, we chose to highlight the game because it's made by a studio with a track record of delivering when it comes to Early Access. Klei has released *Don't Starve* and *Invisible Inc.* through the Early Access platform and they both came out the other side as fantastic games.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 9/10



RUST

DEVELOPER: FACEPUNCH STUDIOS

TIME IN EARLY ACCESS 3 YEARS 6 MONTHS

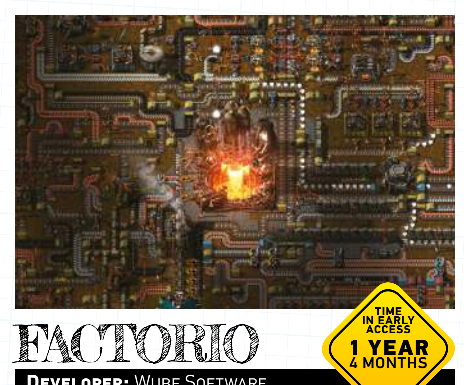
WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

As with *DayZ*, *Rust* is a game where you start with nothing and need to find the resources required to survive. The big difference with *Rust* is the game's focus on crafting and base building. Inevitably, the game tends to take the course of banding together with a few friends to construct a base and then heading out to raid other bases for resources. And for fun.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

By the developers' own admission, *Rust* started off as a *DayZ* clone, but quickly began to find its own path. Crafting became a bigger focus and zombies were removed in 2014 to be replaced with animals. More recently, an experience system has been removed, allowing you to craft anything from the outset, providing you can find the components.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 6/10



FACTORIO

DEVELOPER: WUBE SOFTWARE

TIME IN EARLY ACCESS 1 YEAR 4 MONTHS

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Imagine if *Sim City* was an RTS and you're on the road to understanding what *Factorio* is. The idea is to build and maintain factories that form an increasingly complex automated network that mines and processes resources, and fights off enemies. You might also have seen people sharing some more bizarre creations online, including a huge grid of colour signallers built to play the video for Darude's 'Sandstorm'.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

Factorio was already in a good state at release, but a steady stream of updates have refined and expanded on the experience. These have included everything from bug fixes and UI improvements, to new features like nuclear power and the blueprint library. Communication has been good too: the developer regularly posts about the development process and asks for feedback on new ideas.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 8/10



BESIEGE

DEVELOPER: SPIDERLING STUDIOS

TIME IN EARLY ACCESS 2 YEARS 5 MONTHS

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

At the beginning of a level you get given a goal. This might be to kill a certain number of soldiers, or smash a building to pieces. You then set to work building a medieval-style contraption that leverages the game's physics system to wreak havoc on your targets and achieve said goal.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

Moving from Unity 4 to Unity 5 was an important move from the project, improving its physics and generally providing a smoother experience. Aside from that, Spiderling Studios has gradually been adding new levels and components. There's a significant update on the horizon that will add multiplayer, allowing you to pit your creations against each other, or work collaboratively. »

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 8/10

UNDER CONSTRUCTION – UNDER CONSTRUCTION



TIME IN EARLY ACCESS: 2 YEARS 6 MONTHS

SUBNAUTICA

DEVELOPER: UNKNOWN WORLDS ENTERTAINMENT

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Your goal in this underwater open-world is to survive, explore, and, eventually, escape. You can craft everything from knives to submarines to help you to that end. At its best, *Subnautica* is able to capture the beauty and wonder of exploring an alien world, as well as the sense of fear and isolation that the unknown inevitably provokes.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

Subnautica has been fantastic when it comes to allowing players to have their say. Not only can you submit feedback in-game, you can log onto a public board to check development progress and submit feature requests. Updates are released every few weeks, adding new items, features and creatures, updating visuals, fixing bugs, and even adding VR support. It may have been in Early Access for some time, but it's made steady progress.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 7/10



TIME IN EARLY ACCESS: 2 YEARS 9 MONTHS

THE LONG DARK

DEVELOPER: HINTERLAND STUDIO

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

A pure survival experience, there are no zombies or other players to worry about in *The Long Dark*. Your enemies are hunger, thirst, cold and fatigue. It's a brutally difficult game that requires you to keep coming back as you hone your survival skills and gradually last longer and longer in its unforgiving frozen environment.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

It was always intended that *The Long Dark* would have a story mode, but Hinterland made the sensible decision to focus on the sandbox mode to ensure the core of the survival experience was right first. Gradual iteration (updates are released on a near weekly basis) has resulted in an excellent survival experience. The first part of the story mode is due this August.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 9/10



TIME IN EARLY ACCESS: 2 YEARS 4 MONTHS

MEDIEVAL ENGINEERS

DEVELOPER: KEEN SOFTWARE HOUSE

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

This is a game about building, medieval style. As well as unleashing your inner architect to build castles and cities, you can construct mechanical devices like catapults and water wheels. There's an element of realism that makes it a little different to the litany of other sandbox construction games out there; build a huge tower without thinking about its structural integrity, and it could collapse.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

Medieval Engineers builds on the foundations laid by *Space Engineers*, also in Early Access, though now in its beta phase. There may be cause for concern about the developer splitting their workload between two titles, but they do stick to a regular update schedule, with minor updates hitting weekly and more significant ones every few months.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 6/10







TIME IN EARLY ACCESS: 1 YEAR 4 MONTHS

H1Z1: KING OF THE KILL

DEVELOPER: DAYBREAK GAME COMPANY

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

King Of The Kill is a battle royal-style videogame where you've got to scavenge for gear quickly and battle with your fellow players in a bid to be the last one left standing. If you're thinking that sounds suspiciously like *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, that's because the game's lead designer Brendan Greene consulted on the game.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

H1Z1 is another example of a game that started life as a *DayZ* clone. However, after introducing a battle royal mode that gained some popularity, Daybreak made the decision to split *H1Z1* into two separate games. Its zombie survival roots live on in *H1Z1: Just Survive*, while the battle royal mode became *H1Z1: King Of The Kill*. Its future is uncertain, with *Battlegrounds* seemingly stealing its thunder.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 5/10



TIME IN EARLY ACCESS: 0 YEARS 9 MONTHS

DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

DEVELOPER: LARIAN STUDIOS

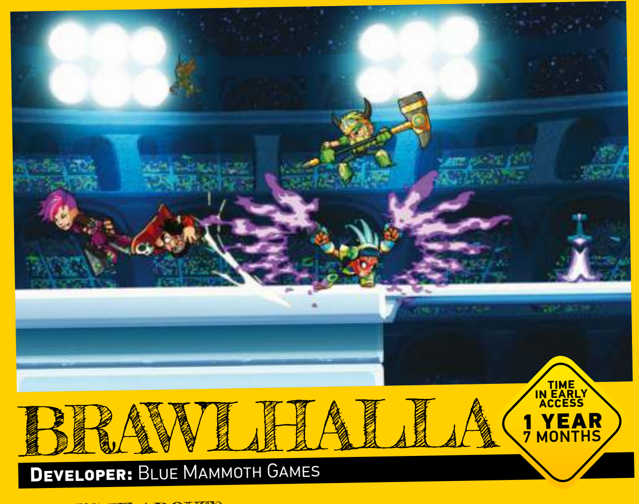
WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Create your own character, choose your origin story, then head out to unravel a dark story in this tactical turn-based RPG. The game has a big focus on freedom, allowing you to kill any NPC in the game and develop relationships with characters that range from romance to hatred, based on how you choose to interact with them.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

It's relatively early days, but the overwhelmingly positive reception the game has received shows it's starting from a strong position. There have been plenty of bug fixes, minor adjustments and balancing tweaks – changes to damage bonuses, for example – but there have also been more significant additions, like the introduction of Polymorph abilities that let you sprout wings, horns and tentacles to aid you in battle. And now it has a release date for 14 September 2017.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 10/10



BRAWLHALLA

TIME IN EARLY ACCESS 1 YEAR 7 MONTHS

DEVELOPER: BLUE MAMMOTH GAMES

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Brawlhalla is a free-to-play fighter and, to put it bluntly, something of a *Smash Bros* clone. That means up to eight players battling to knock each other off the levels' platforms, using weapons and gadgets that spawn randomly into the stage to help with that task. Blue Mammoth is trying to create a healthy competitive scene, going so far as to hold a *Brawlhalla* World Championship.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

Since *Brawlhalla*'s release, Blue Mammoth has added new characters to the roster, new maps, new mechanics like gravity cancelling, and improved the game's aesthetics with new animation and art. The team has continually rebalanced the game as more has been added, too.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 7/10



ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED



TIME IN EARLY ACCESS 2 YEARS 0 MONTHS

DEVELOPER: STUDIO WILDCARD

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Dinosaurs. *Ark: Survival Evolved* has got the crafting, building and survival systems that we've come to associate with the MMO survival genre, but it's the fact that gigantic dinosaurs roam the land, ready to be fought and tamed, that gives it a unique twist.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

Lots of new content has been added since the game's release: new dinosaurs, new bosses, new turrets, underwater bases, new beards and much more. Take a look at what the player base is saying, though, and you'll find plenty of people complaining that bugs and optimisation issues aren't being addressed, and that new features are being stacked on a shaky foundation that needs polishing.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 5/10



RIMWORLD

TIME IN EARLY ACCESS 0 YEARS 11 MONTHS

DEVELOPER: LUDEON STUDIOS

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

In *Rimworld*, you are tasked with building and managing a sci-fi colony with a Wild-West frontier feel. The hook is that you can choose "AI Storytellers" with differing preferences for tension, chaos and relaxation to change the tone of your experience. The frequency of events like pirate raids and resource drops depends on which AI is running the show.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

There have been all sorts of new additions to *Rimworld* since its release. This includes things like spherical world generation, the ability to group colonists into 'caravans' that can be managed as a single unit, and the introduction of transport pods that lets you launch people and gear across large distances. The community seems positive about the direction it's heading in.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 7/10



THE FOREST

TIME IN EARLY ACCESS 3 YEARS 1 MONTHS

DEVELOPER: ENDNIGHT GAMES

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Steam isn't exactly crying out for survival games, and yes, *The Forest* has the crafting and building mechanics that all those games tend to have. Thankfully, it differentiates itself through its focus on horror. Sure, there are other survival games with zombies, but they don't come close to the terror *The Forest* creates with the freakish and deformed cannibalistic mutants that roam its dark corners.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

Probably the biggest change since *The Forest*'s release has been the introduction of co-op, helping to make that terrifying world just a little bit more bearable. There have also been new mutants, animals, crafting options and items added over time, as well as work on visuals and optimisation.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 5/10



ASTRONEER

TIME IN EARLY ACCESS 0 YEARS 6 MONTHS

DEVELOPER: SYSTEM ERA SOFTWORKS

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

Fair or not, people have taken to calling *Astroneer* 'the game *No Man's Sky* should have been'. Certainly, the games share similarities. You explore procedurally generated planets that you can terraform at will, can mine resources, and build vehicles and bases. In *Astroneer*, however, you can do it all in four-player co-op.

HOW HAS IT CHANGED?

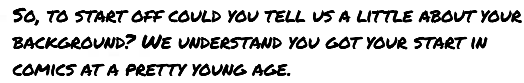
It seems that the focus so far has been on bug fixing, performance and gameplay tweaks such as adjustments to the speed of the research curve. There have been more significant additions, however, like an augment system that allows you to change the functionality of tools. You can find complaints about the game not having enough content, but that's unsurprising at this early stage.

CHANCES OF FULL RELEASE: 7/10



From Panels to Pixels

Airship Syndicate CEO and creative director Joe Madureira reflects on his journey from Marvel Comics to launching Darksiders and now resurrecting his own comic series Battle Chasers in videogame form



So, to start off could you tell us a little about your background? We understand you got your start in comics at a pretty young age.

I was going to a high school in New York City called the High School of Art and Design and they had an internship program that you can do in your third year; your junior year. They had various publishers throughout the city and one of them was Marvel Comics – and DC actually – and because I was at the time so into comics and making up my own characters and stories and stuff, people were like "you gotta do this internship at Marvel Comics." At that time I was planning on going to college and all this stuff, and I had to get my grades up, so the internship was really not a good idea for me, but I did it anyway. I just met a lot of editors and artists when I was working there and they would look at my work and gave me some little jobs like a back cover or pin-up or something. I was still in high school when my work was being published at Marvel and they said, "Whenever you graduate we're going to hire you," and I was like "*sure*." It was all very surreal at the time and then sure enough after high school they gave me the *Deadpool* four-issue mini series. Not long after that I got on *Uncanny X-Men*, which was crazy to me. It was one of the books that I always followed as a child, no matter what artist or writer was on it. It was just the best. I did not feel worthy at all to follow in their footsteps. It was very surreal. I did *X-Men* for a while and then I left to do my own thing, *Battle Chasers*, and I did that for nine issues and then I got into the games industry.



Joe Madureira's style was influenced greatly by comic artist Arthur Adams, but gradually began to evolve with more and more stylistic flourishes more commonly associated with Manga art.

Did starting the comics imprint label Cliffhanger with J. Scott Campbell and Humberto Ramos stem from a desire to be your own boss?

It was that, yes. It was the fact that I wanted to do a fantasy book and there wasn't really a place for that at Marvel or any of the other »



While the characters in this game will be familiar to fans of the original *Battle Chasers* comics, the world is something completely new so it can live as a standalone title.

"IF IT WASN'T FOR MY CAREER IN COMICS I DEFINITELY WOULDN'T HAVE HAD THOSE OPPORTUNITIES IN THE GAMES INDUSTRY"

THE JOE MAD TIMELINE

CHARTING THE JOURNEY FROM COMIC ARTIST TO GAMING MOGUL

1990 Interns at Marvel Comics from High School of Art and Design in Manhattan

1991 First published work appears in *Marvel Comics Presents* #89

1993 Given first solo run on Deadpool miniseries *The Circle Chase*

1994 Becomes lead penciller on *Uncanny X-Men* series, producing around 30 titles for Marvel's flagship superhero brand over the next three years

1997 Leaves Marvel to start up *Battle Chasers* series. The comic launches under a new imprint named Cliffhanger founded by Madureira, J. Scott Campbell and Humberto Ramos, all fellow artists. Cliffhanger itself is a subsidiary of WildStorm Comics founded by fellow former *X-Men* penciller Jim Lee

2001 *Battle Chasers* #9 released. It is the final issue published, as Madureira cancels #10

2004 A videogame named *Dragonkind* is cancelled for which Madureira did concept artwork

2005 Vigil Games founded by Madureira and videogame designer David L. Adams, with Madureira as creative director

2007 Vigil's first game, *Darksiders*, with characters designed by Madureira, is announced

2008 Marvel's *The Ultimates 3* five-issue run begins with Joe Madureira returning temporarily to work as artist. It boasted pre-order sales of 131,401 copies.

2010 *Darksiders* released on Xbox 360 and PS3

2011 Madureira works on *Avenging Spider-Man* series with Zeb Wells as writer

2012 *Darksiders II* released on PS3 and Xbox 360

2013 Madureira reteams with Zeb Wells to work on *Savage Wolverine* series starting from #6

2015 Airship Syndicate founded by Madureira and Ryan Stefanelli, who was lead level designer on *Darksiders* and producer on *Darksiders II*. Kickstarter for *Battle Chasers: Nightwar* is launched, reaching 70% of its target in first 24 hours. After 72 hours it was fully funded

2016 Nordic Games (later renamed THQ Nordic) joins *Battle Chasers: Nightwar* as publisher, aiding development funding to fulfill the game's stretch goals of voice acting and additional story content



The turn-based combat of *Nightwar* is fairly typical of the genre, with basic attacks supplemented by abilities that drain mana. Each character has a fair number of these abilities as well as a burst ability that is earned through combat.

Nightwar makes great use of the art assets of Madureira and his team, with animated panels used for cutscenes and bright colours used throughout, even in the dungeons. It gives the whole game a vibrant and energetic feel.

While *Battle Chasers* quickly managed to smash through its funding goal, it didn't quite reach all of its stretch goals during the campaign. However, post campaign pledges and the support of THQ Nordic has meant the project is now fully funded.

publishers. They were doing Conan and stuff, but it wasn't anything like the weird, anime, JRPG fantasy that I was into at the time. At some point, as a creator, you wonder, can I do this on my own? Rather than making money for other people, can I make money for myself doing this? And so it was an exciting time, because we were all doing our books at around the same time. It was actually Jim Lee who said, "Why don't you guys all just release them at the same time under this imprint, Cliffhanger." I mean, it took us forever to come up with that name, but the general idea was discussed pretty early on and it worked out. All of our books were pretty successful and it generated a lot of buzz. I actually just hung out with those two guys again in Mexico a few weeks ago for a Cliffhanger reunion panel. So that was pretty fun.

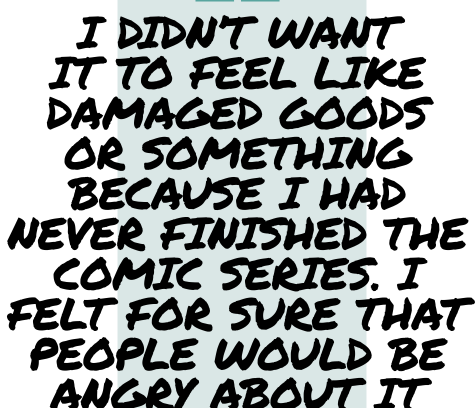
That would have been to mark the 20th anniversary?
Yeah. We're never together in one place, so that was pretty rare and really cool.

Was getting into games always an ambition of yours or something that crept into your thinking over time?
It kind of crept in. I've played games since I got my Atari 2600 when I was five years old and I was always a huge gamer. I bought every console. I even had 3DO and Neo Geo, the weird ones, Jaguar too. So I was a huge gamer, but I never really thought about the job aspect of it. I never thought about who makes them or how or anything. I was just so into it and over the years I would meet, through doing comics, people who would be like, "This guy works at Disney and he wants to meet you and this guy works at Sony and they love *Battle Chasers*," and it's like, "What!? Weird. Really?" So I started to make contacts in the games industry and eventually I would talk to so many guys who said, "You have so many fans at the studio, you should work in the games industry," and I thought, "Hmm, this is interesting." And eventually there was just an opportunity that I couldn't pass up. I had been doing comics for a decent amount of time at that point and I just wanted to do something new. So, I took the jump.

Again, was there an element of being in control of your own destiny and starting your own company rather than just taking contract work?
Yeah, but I would have done anything to work in the games industry at that point. I would do covers for *PSM Magazine* and that was the closest that I came. "A *Metal Gear* cover! A *Resident Evil* cover! What?" I was so excited to draw those characters and be somewhat touching on the games industry, so when I was able to get in, I would have taken a salaried job for sure as an artist anywhere. It just so happened that some guys that I knew were doing a startup and they were like, "Do you want to be our art director?" and I said yes. And that failed. But I managed to stay in the games industry and I did work as an employee. Whenever the opportunity presents itself to do a startup I always jump at it. I like being in at the beginning and I like building teams. All of that stuff is really exciting to me.

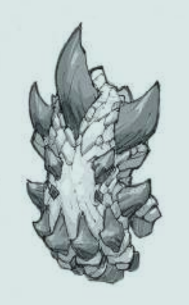
If it wasn't for my career in comics I definitely wouldn't have had those opportunities in the games industry. So, ironically people were like, "How could you leave comics for games?" and it is comics that opened that door to the gaming world for me.

In all of the years of Darksiders was the most common question that was fired at you "when are you bringing back Battle Chasers"?
Yes. I would get that all of the time. We would be doing press tours and someone in the audience would always be like, "When are you finishing *Battle Chasers*?" and the room would laugh. It was a *thing*. Strangely enough, now that we're doing this, all people ask is "are you working on *Darksiders 3*?" and "when's the next *Darksiders*?" The game was recently announced and I'm not on that development team, so people had strong reactions to that. It's been pretty interesting. I don't know what they're going to ask me about now, once the game comes out. "Where's the comic?" maybe. I've got to get on that.



> **"I didn't want it to feel like damaged goods or something because I had never finished the comic series. I felt for sure that people would be angry about it"**







"When are you going back to X-Men?" maybe?
No! [laughs]

We saw that you tweeted around the time that Darksiders 3 was announced in defence of the design of its lead character, Fury. Did you find the backlash to be strange?
I think that a lot of people that are reacting to her design are really reacting to the art direction. You can have three or four artists work off the same concept and they'll do completely different things with it. So, usually it's not just a matter of you do a drawing and hand it off, especially on *Battle Chasers*. I'll work with the 3D artist pretty extensively. It's like a back and forth, because once you see something in 3D it needs some fine-tuning. We'll do paint-overs and things and rotate the model around. We'll make changes after and so in that particular case, with Fury, I did just basically hand off the drawing and I didn't see it again until I saw the game recently. I was like, "Oh, wow. That's what she looks like." I didn't know how they were going to do the hair for instance. When you're on a team and you're actively working on something you can fine-tune it as you go and I was not involved in that part of the character's creation. I can kind of see why people say "it doesn't look like your stuff" and it *is* my stuff, under there, it's just that I wasn't as involved in it all of the way through like I was with the other horsemen. That might be it.

Was it a no-brainer that this would be the project to move onto next given how often it came up?
There were other ideas. I felt partially that because the series was so old that people would either not care or have a negative reaction to it, like, "Ugh, I want to see something new," and I didn't want it to feel like damaged goods or something because I had never finished the comic series. I felt for sure that people would be angry about it. So, I was a little hesitant and we did start taking a stab at creating a new fantasy world, but it had some technology and I was basically doing *Battle Chasers* again and I realised "maybe we should just do *Battle Chasers*", because it has all of these elements already. It does have a following that's pretty vocal that I see at every show that I go to. And as we would tell people about the project that we were working on, friends of the studio, that didn't know what we were doing, they would say, "You guys are making a *Battle Chasers* game, right? It's a no-brainer. You have to." And we were like, "Damn it! Why does everyone keep saying that? I guess we should." So, when we announced it and it got the support that it did it was a huge relief. Now I'm really glad that we did. It's so fun working on these characters again. But at first I was pretty nervous about it.

What was the whole Kickstarter process like for you?
It was so nerve-wracking. It was so stressful. The month leading up to it and then that whole month after. With Kickstarter you blow up the first couple of days and then it just goes down and it's stuck in that trough for weeks. There's no movement and we thought, "What's going on?"

How did you find managing the campaign, in terms of creating a gameplay demo, managing rewards and keeping things updated? Some developers find it hard.
People tend to overdo it too. You'll do anything for a pledge so you'll »

offer all kinds of stuff and then you'll have to fulfill it at the end. Luckily we had some friends that had done them. We talked to guys like Redhook who did *Darkest Dungeon*, the *Banner Saga* guys, so we had friends that warned us: "Don't do this, do that. Not this!" And so even with all of the warnings, it is a huge time constraint. We had a very small team at that time; only four or five people. It took, probably, two people out of commission almost full-time for a straight month, just getting everything set up and getting the art for the page and all of that. And like you said, we did have a playable chunk of the game so we could show actual footage, which helped a lot. It wasn't just a concept of "look how cool this *could* be." I really think it is important to have something to show of the actual game, not smoke and mirrors. I think that helped us a lot too.

When THQ Nordic came onboard as publisher, did you experience any backlash about that from Kickstarter backers?

We were worried about it, actually, how it would be perceived, but I think because we pretty clearly explained what was going to come of that and why, and what we were going to be able to add to the game, because of their involvement, people were like, "Cool. More stuff!" There might have been a couple of angry people, but it was not a backlash at all. It was more like, "Cool, the game is going to be even bigger and give more stuff."

How much of the Battle Chasers world was already there and planned from the comics before heading into Nightwar?

> "When we initially pitched Darksiders way back in the day, the first concept was that it would be a four-player co-op, third-person action game"

Pretty much the only thing that has carried over from the comics are the heroes. The world itself, it's deliberately a side adventure that's in an area that I've never mentioned in the comics before. It's completely off on its own, so all of that stuff was developed just for the game, but the heroes are ones that you know from the comics.

There are some strange gamey modifications that we had to make, like Gully has the most powerful gauntlets ever from her father, but then you can get weapon upgrades from the store that are better [laughs]. Stuff like that. Or you'll get a rusty broadsword that has higher stats than Garrison's legendary blade. Although we do something cool with those weapons later on in the end game, so they do become important. There's just gamey stuff like that you're like, "Why is Calibretto the healer? He has big guns! This doesn't make sense." But you need the combat roles. Luckily I'm a pretty easy IP holder. "Approved!" "Is Gully going to wear new gloves? That doesn't make sense." "Yeah, whatever, we'll just do it." It's good for the game.

How did you ultimately settle on the genre and style of game, a turn-based RPG?

First of all, we're all just fans of RPGs. It's one of our favourites. I would say that RPGs and Metroidvania games are the two we knew we had to do one of. Because of our team size we definitely wanted to keep the studio pretty small and especially at the beginning, we didn't have a choice. We just had the people we had. You can make a really good turn-based game with really high production values much more easily than you can make an action game, especially if

BIO CHASERS

A quick look at the battle-hungry heroes

GULLY

The nine-year old daughter of a famous and decorated member of the Royal Guard, Aramus, who went missing under mysterious circumstances, Gully has inherited her father's magical gauntlets, which imbue her with incredible strength and near invulnerability.

ROLE: Tank

ALUMON

A new character and hero for the *Battle Chasers* realm, Alumon is described as a Devil Hunter. He was never mentioned or featured in the original comic book run, so he is exclusive to the *Nightwar* story arc. His skills have been described as being a slayer of evil and healer of wounds.

ROLE: TBC

RED MONIKA

This bounty hunter is a proficient fighter who actually trained Garrison in the art of sword fighting having known each other from a young age. While Garrison would go on to join the Royal Guard, Monika has little interest in laws and rules. She is essentially an outlaw and is prepared to use any tactics necessary to win.

ROLE: Rogue

it's party based. We have three playable heroes, so if it were an action game it would be really different. It would have probably focused more on a single character and it's just way, *way* more expensive. It helped us scale the game to what it is now. Scoping things is one of the hardest challenges. When we initially pitched *Darksiders* way back in the day, the first concept was that it would be a four-player co-op, third-person action game, and luckily THQ said, "Erm, you guys, if you make one fun character you'll be lucky. Stop being crazy." We were a new studio and we were still building the team and the technology, so that was a good call in hindsight. We didn't know; we just wanted to make the craziest thing ever and we were way over-scoping. That was something that we've learned over the years. If you scope beyond what you can do, well, it's just a mess.

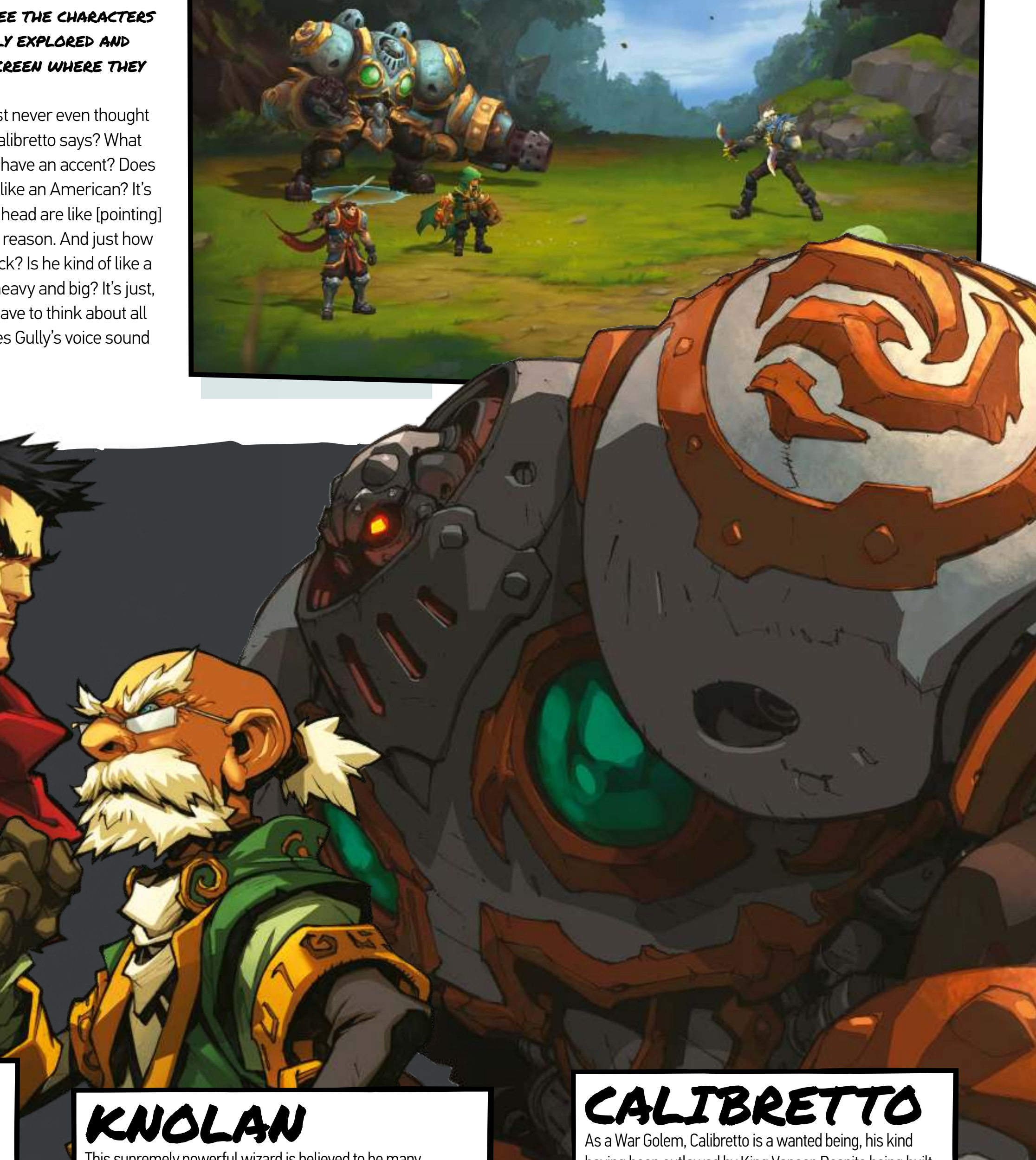
WHAT HAS IT BEEN LIKE BEING ABLE TO SEE THE CHARACTERS YOU CREATED ALL THAT TIME AGO BE FULLY EXPLORED AND SHOW OFF EVERYTHING THEY CAN DO ON SCREEN WHERE THEY COULDN'T ON THE PAGE?

Yeah, it's been *so* surreal. There's stuff that I just never even thought about. Like, what is that "Hmmzzt" thing that Calibretto says? What does that sounds like, when he talks? Does he have an accent? Does Knolan have a British accent or does he speak like an American? It's weird, because the voices that I've heard in my head are like [pointing] American, American, British for some strange reason. And just how they move and how quickly does Garrison attack? Is he kind of like a ninja with quick slashes or is his sword really heavy and big? It's just, wow, I just draw him slashing stuff, but now I have to think about all these things. It was really interesting. What does Gully's voice sound like? It's been crazy. I love it.

Along with *Battle Chasers: Nightwar*, Madureira is going to continue the comic series with issues 10-12, picking up the story where he last left it back in 2001. Digital versions of all issues were offered as rewards to Kickstarter backers.

NOW THAT YOU'VE GOT BATTLE CHASERS HAPPENING AND IT'S COMING TOGETHER, ARE YOU EVEN BEGINNING TO THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE AND YOUR HOPES FOR THE STUDIO?

We have and we are. We're already planning the next thing because, as a game is wrapping, the next thing needs to start rolling for people to move onto. It's very exciting. There are a couple of different things we're looking at. One scenario is if *Battle Chasers* does really well, what is that going to lead to? How is that going to affect our plans? People have asked, will there be a sequel or add-ons? And it really is very dependent on how the game does. That's the X-factor and then aside from that we do have our plans we can't talk about yet. I'll just say, we're excited about the next thing.



GARRISON

A master swordsman and former Royal Guardsman along with Gully's father Aramus, Garrison was trained in sword fighting by Red Monika. He is introduced in the comics having recently lost his wife and having abandoned a life of combat. His primary weapon is a magical sword.

ROLE: *Warrior*

KNOLAN

This supremely powerful wizard is believed to be many hundreds of years old having extended his life through his mastery of the arcane arts. He has an incredible understanding of magical artifacts as well as being a poweful spell-caster. He is regularly accompanied by his companion Calibretto.

ROLE: *Mage*

CALIBRETTO

As a War Golem, Calibretto is a wanted being, his kind having been outlawed by King Vaneer. Despite being built by the Dwarven people to serve in The Great War, 'Bretto displays a caring and nurturing personality. After the war he was found by the wizard Knolan and repaired.

ROLE: *Healer/Tank*



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Reviews

68

PREY

Has Arkane made the *System Shock* of this generation?





THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













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PREY LACKS THE VARIETY OR FOCUS TO EVER TRULY SETTLE INTO A COMFORTABLE RHYTHM

Left: Talos I is one of the most beautiful game spaces we have ever encountered. It's a marvellous, player reactive space that demonstrates Arkane's mastery over level design. It feels like a real space where people have lived and died, it's easy to spend hours here.

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS

Across all platforms, *Prey* is a game beset with technical issues. Console players can expect horrifically long load times between areas, exacerbated by the game's design, especially towards the end of the game as it pushes you to move quickly from one section to another. PS4 players should also be wary of input latency, making the game feel sluggish, while *Prey* on all platforms suffers from bugs that can affect progression and save data. It's frustrating to see the game launch in this state and puts a cloud over it, especially as you can expect to spend anywhere from 15 to 40 hours on board Talos I – there's little worse than a corrupted save file sending you back a handful of hours.





STRUGGLING TO BREATHE

Prey

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Bethesda
DEVELOPER: Arkane Studios
PRICE: £59.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

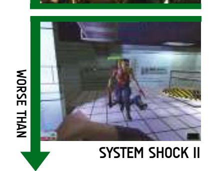
Left: Scanning enemies lets you unlock details on their strengths and weaknesses, not to mention deeper access to certain Neuromod skill trees.

BETTER THAN



DEUS EX: MANKIND DIVIDED

WORSE THAN



SYSTEM SHOCK II



Left: Games like *BioShock* may have trained a generation into scouring bins and cupboards for useless resources, but *Prey* subverts this excellently by giving you the opportunity to recycle components and fabricate them into useful items, such as med-kits and ammunition.

Is Arkane Studios having an identity crisis? It's a question that's inherently difficult to answer, but one that seems particularly relevant given the ways in which *Prey* succeeds and fails. For all that the game does well – particularly the ways in which it strikes a balance between a yearning for knowledge and a drive for survival – *Prey* is never quite able to escape the long shadow cast by *System Shock*. That isn't merely a symptom of thrusting a wrench in your hand and setting an immersive sim in the stars, but a problem directly brought about by Arkane and its incessant attempts to become the torchbearer of the Looking Glass legacy.

Prey isn't some bizarre epiphany of that fact, but more a casual confirmation of it. The first indication that the framework popularised by Irrational Games and Looking Glass, later perfected by Ion Storm, can hinder creative design just as easily as it can propagate it. Where the *Dishonored* titles looked to the ideas and themes underpinning *Thief II: The Metal Age* and sought to build on and advance them – the resulting experience a masterful stealth game that simply couldn't have existed two decades ago – the elements that are formative to the design of *Prey* feel exposed and raw. *Prey* may have the fundamentals of the genre locked down, but it doesn't have *the spark* that made them legend so many years ago. Perhaps it's ironic: for a game so inherently focused around the question and exploration of identity, *Prey* sure seems to be lacking one to call its own.

Set in the year 2032, you take on the role of Morgan Yu; a scientist that finds herself – or himself, it's up to you – trapped on board the space station (turned secret research lab, turned extraterrestrial murder zone) Talos I. With the station now overrun by a highly intelligent race of aliens, called the Typhon, you must work to survive a disaster that you may well be responsible for incubating, but have no direct knowledge of unleashing.

You see, Talos I is the home of the Neuromod. That's a technology derived from the DNA of the Typhon, giving humans the opportunity to augment their bodies and minds with powerful abilities. This can be as awesome as making you strong enough to pry locked doors open with your bare hands, or as truly ridiculous as letting you transform yourself into a fully-functioning desk lamp – both are skills with practical application in *Prey*, should you choose to invest in them.

Morgan, as chief architect of the Neuromod, and lab rat for the initial testing, comes to discover that removing a mod rolls the user's memory back to its pre-installation state. *Prey* picks up with Talos I on the verge of collapse, its crew either dead or MIA, and a protagonist that has no recollection of what has transpired. *Prey* quickly establishes a world in which you must call everything you see into question. Every person, artificial intelligence and piece of data you discover seems to have its own agenda, and figuring out who (or what) you can trust as you fight for survival and clarity is a big part of *Prey*'s narrative drive. It means you must scrutinise even your own perception of events, calling into question your involvement in the disaster, the echoes of your previous self that seemingly haunt you in the world, and your agency in the moment-to-moment action of the game – a smart subversion of *BioShock*'s 'Would You Kindly' twist delivered at the outset rather than the end. At least, that's how it seems on the surface. The further you delve into the mysteries of *Prey* the more it seems to lose its grip on its own narrative ambitions, eventually pouring everything into the whims of simplistic environmental storytelling.

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

QUIETLY CONFIDENT Given the immersive sim DNA of *Prey*, it's designed in such a way that you can play however you want, leaning on stealth or all-out attack to push through enemies.

That wouldn't be a huge problem in itself, but *Prey* lacks the variety or focus to ever truly settle into a comfortable rhythm. With a disaster looming, your goal flitters between survival and gathering information, trawling through bins and briefcases and pumping shotgun rounds into shadowy monsters. It's a familiar blend, but one that can too often feel at odds with itself. *Prey* never quite captures the unease or tension of the horror experience it presents itself as, nor does it find the energy or tempo of

the action game it clearly is. The resulting experience is uneven, then. At times impressive in its capacity to foster fear, pushing you to utilise every (limited) resource available to you in an effort to survive for just a second longer, and at others excelling at pushing you into frantic fights against hordes of unruly enemies, but those moments of accelerated excitement seem to be few and far between.

What's left between all of this is a rather pedestrian set of main objectives and side-quests set in one of the most magnificent pieces of structural design we've ever seen in a videogame. Talos I is a vast and interconnected space that *feels real*, a place where people could have lived, worked and, later, died. But even that works against *Prey* eventually, with Arkane focusing too heavily on the utilitarian nature of the station. The lack of variety in the station's locales makes sense – it is, after all, an installation that was designed to house scientists before it became the site for alien genome splicing – but the lack of variety in objectives or the stories they lead to does not.

There's only one thing you can truly trust in *Prey* and that's your curiosity. You're encouraged to pay close attention to everything that you see and hear; every locked door, password-protected computer and environmental barrier can be overcome if you approach it in the right way, and it may just be hiding the secrets you so desire. That's empowering and impressive, but quickly diluted as you come to realise that the hundreds of emails you are trawling through are fairly forgettable: employees embroiled in workplace dramas, trading gossip on former colleagues and openly discussing the combinations to the restricted lockbox or door inevitably located just a few feet away from you. The mundanity of all of this goes a long way to establish a sense of place and realism, but it doesn't bring much to the game or narrative.

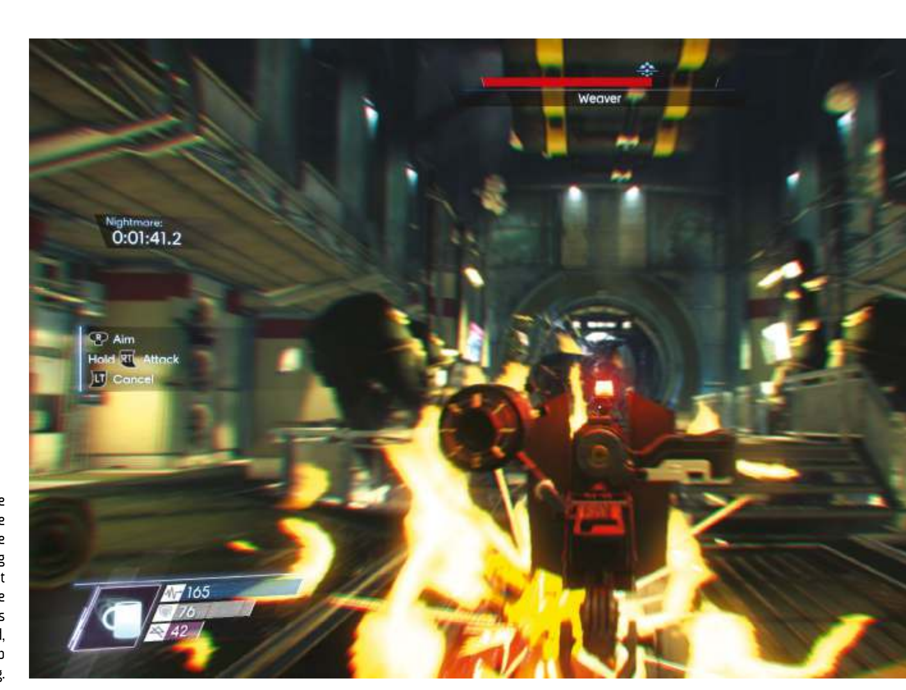
It's a great shame, because so much of *Prey* revolves around Morgan rebuilding her memories and making sense of her own morality. The way the game asks you to do this, however, is through the emails and audio logs you'll find across Talos I's abundance of corpses. The rare characters you do meet are often cardboard cutouts, part-players in an overarching narrative that feels stretched thin. It's through these encounters that the game asks you to help shape your personalised ending; making moral decisions after, at best, a bit of busywork or, at worst, after a series of anticlimactic events. Arkane does a good job of raising the profile and importance of these characters, especially as the game switches up a gear in the final act, but they ultimately feel like disposable pieces of the larger puzzle – a direct result of the game being so open and reactive.

FAQs

Q. PREY IS BACK THEN?
This isn't *that Prey*. While Human Head did have a sequel to the 2006 FPS in development long ago, this should be treated as a full reboot.

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
If you want to see everything Talos I has to offer, you can expect to put a minimum of 25 hours into *Prey*.

Q. WHY THE IMMERSIVE SIM OBSESSION?
Arkane is full of ex-Looking Glass employees, and it has taken to carrying on the legacy of *System Shock II* here in *Prey*.



Right: While a lot of the focus has been on the Neuromods and the strange ability upgrades they bring to play, it's the weapons that impressed us the most. The shotgun, in particular, feels wickedly powerful to wield, especially when you beef up the power and handling.



Everyone on the station can be killed if you want to go psychopathic, or you can go out of your way to save them, should you feel so inclined.

Here's the thing with *Prey* – all of this can be ignored. It affords you a baffling amount of freedom, giving you the opportunity to dive deep into the mystery. While you could avoid much of the environmental storytelling, it will ultimately restrict you from getting to the heart of what makes *Prey* great. The more weapon upgrade kits you discover, the more Neuromods you install – granting you a host of enhanced human and insane alien abilities – and the more resources you obtain, the more the game will begin to shed its annoyances.

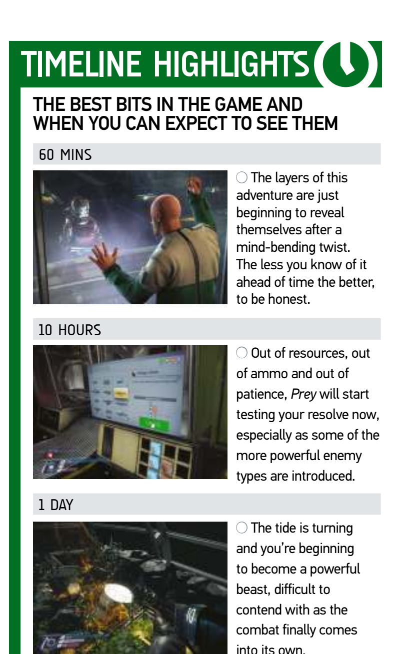


Right: Arkane may have created a faithful immersive sim, and all of the elements are certainly there, but it fails to come together as well as it perhaps should. Prolonged sessions of enjoyment are often undercut by long stretches of boredom.

SO MUCH OF PREY REVOLVES AROUND MORGAN REBUILDING HER MEMORIES AND MAKING SENSE OF HER OWN MORALITY

Below: The Neuromods can combine in some exciting ways, though Prey never really delivers combat opportunities to take full advantage of them.





TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

60 MINS

The layers of this adventure are just beginning to reveal themselves after a mind-bending twist. The less you know of it ahead of time the better, to be honest.

10 HOURS

Out of resources, out of ammo and out of patience, *Prey* will start testing your resolve now, especially as some of the more powerful enemy types are introduced.

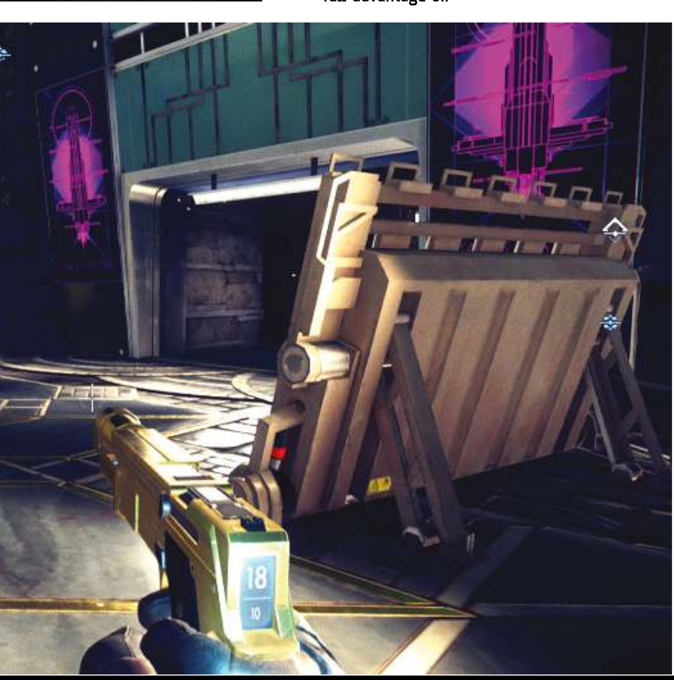
1 DAY

The tide is turning and you're beginning to become a powerful beast, difficult to contend with as the combat finally comes into its own.



ZERO-G

One of the coolest elements of *Prey* is when it steps outside of its natural boundaries and invites you to enjoy the majesty of space. The entire station is connected by air locks that, once unlocked, act as a fast travel of sorts. It gives you the opportunity to enjoy zero-G movement in space, looking out across the world and the ruined space station – a moment of respite away from the chaos inside. The ruins of certain wings of the station can be explored, giving you a chance to quietly meditate and locate bountiful amounts of rare items and materials. It's a genuinely amazing space to occupy that *Prey* never really takes full advantage of.



The Typhon are a powerful foe, able to take more than a few rounds and send you hurtling back to a respawn without much trouble. It's here where you're really given the space to play, to push the various systems to their limits and enjoy one of Arkane's stronger areas: combat, weapon and enemy design. While the AI isn't as varied or intuitive as the equivalent in *Dishonored*, they still come together to provide quite the threat. The weapons feel *powerful* and wonderful to wield, while the powers themselves offer an ingenious array of gameplay possibilities. When *Prey* steps into its element, it can be an exercise in excellence. It's just such a shame that it takes so long to get there.

Depending on your history with videogames, there are certain elements of *Prey* that might not make sense, or seem like strange design decisions. Ultimately, that's because *Prey* owes a lot to the likes of *System Shock*, *Ultima Underworld* and *Deus Ex*. You can see the marks of these games all over its basic framework, referenced in everything – from system design to plot, to dialogue and mechanics – and that works as both a strength and a weakness. Immersive sims were always designed to encourage player expression, to let players follow their whims and see where the resulting experience will take them.

To an extent, *Prey* succeeds with this. The space created is gorgeous; it has a consistent rule set and objectives that can – largely – be tackled in any order. Like any good immersive sim, it doesn't tell you to fight through nests of enemies, nor does it point you towards the maintenance hatches, the hidden walkways or the walls you can ascend with your Gloo Gun in hand and a little ingenuity. It lets you decide how you want to play and it adapts to it. Where it falls down, however, is that the ways in which it adapts aren't always that interesting, or communicated, such is the problem with the narrative here.

FINGERPRINT

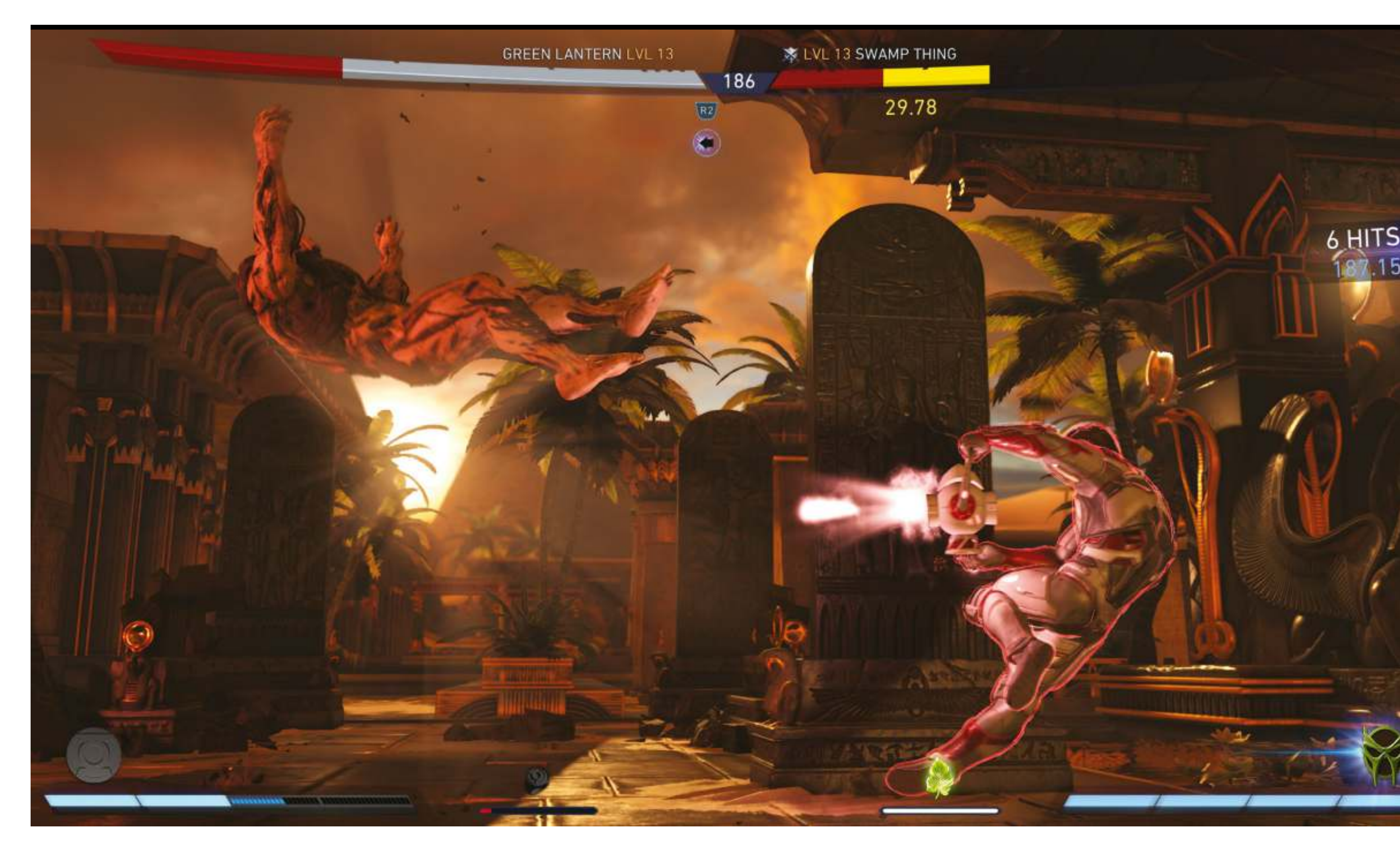
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

REACTIVE DESIGN: More so than *Dishonored*, *Prey* presents you with the opportunity to truly play with the environment, making Talos I feel like a space that constantly has more to offer.

Just as in the immersive sims that Arkane is so dutifully paying homage to here with *Prey*, it's a game that feels like it has been designed to let the player fight back against the developer and find their own way through. Talos I is a broad, but claustrophobically combined, space that showcases a real, genuine sense of creativity from the team. It captures the vibe and greatness of *System Shock*'s own haunted station, or perhaps even *Deus Ex*'s incredible cyberpunk-infused cityscape. Talos I feels lavish and haunted, the perfect location to let players explore the mysteries of the mind with a shotgun in hand, but the pieces don't quite fit together in the way that Arkane clearly intended. Everything *Prey* needed to succeed is in there, somewhere, but it doesn't gel. The game is too undefined, too broad in its ambition and application of its powers, spaces and weapons, that it fails to find and carve out its own identity.

VERDICT 7/10

LESS THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS



PLAYING DRESS-UP IN THE DC UNIVERSE

Injustice 2

There's been a steady uptick in quality with NetherRealm's fighters of late, improvements across the board steadily turning the studio into one of the front runners on the beat-'em-up scene in some regards. Since 2011's *Mortal Kombat* reboot, we've seen games that hold up as proper competitive fighters rather than relying on shock value and wackiness, with quality ramping up with each subsequent release – the first *Injustice* showed real promise and improvement, with *Mortal Kombat X* the most refined and creative of all the team's projects. And now, *Injustice 2* takes a little bit from feedback garnered on those games to create a fighter that sits alongside *MKX* as NetherRealm's finest work.

Core systems change little from the first game – three different strengths of attack and a character-specific trait sit on the face buttons, with shortcuts for throw and interact on triggers along with the Meter Burn button for powering up moves and NetherRealm's ever-pointless stance switch button. The only real change is that more things can be meter burned now, offering Air Escapes to break free of juggle combos and Roll Escapes to safely close distance. Level interactions and transitions return, once again affected by your character's 'class' – while Batman might blow up a sign in the background or leap off it, beefier characters like Swamp Thing or Grodd will just rip it out of the ground and chuck it. Gentler environmental attacks are no longer unblockable and many can be used to extend combos or end on a big damage move, plus working them into your regular strings tends to look flashy as well as dealing good damage, a win/win situation for a fighting game.

NetherRealm's big bullet point for *Injustice 2* is the game's loot system, with countless unique gear pieces (at least in terms of their randomly-rolled stats – many look alike) allowing you to both physically and mechanically customise your heroes and villains to your liking. There's no denying that popping a loot box to find a shiny new Epic for your main is a thrill, but the system itself is somewhat muddy in its execution. Gear stats don't apply in Ranked matches but can only be disabled via a mutual menu option in unranked modes, which can lead to confusion as you attempt to use abilities you don't have or get battered by a fully geared character because you forgot to toggle an option. This is exacerbated by the fact that boxes drop not only gear but unique abilities too, which can be anything from adding a Meter Burn option to a move or combo that doesn't usually have one to completely replace moves or even Character Powers. While this offers great versatility and freedom in modes that support it, that's everything *but* competitive play, where these tools are often needed most to ensure character versatility and counter bad match-ups. Their omission in Ranked naturally

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ALSO ON: Xbox One
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros.
DEVELOPER: NetherRealm
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-8
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

ANIMATION MIGHT FEEL STIFF BUT IN MOST OTHER RESPECTS INJUSTICE 2 IS A CLEAR SUCCESS

FAQs

WILL [INSERT CHARACTER HERE] BE ADDED AS DLC?
Only the first wave of extra characters has been revealed so far. But since there's already precedent for adding 'dead' characters from alternate universes, nobody is off the table.

IS DEADSHOT ACTUALLY BROKEN?
Zoning characters in general are pretty strong in *Injustice 2*, Deadshot in particular as his close game is also decent. Some characters really struggle to get in without spending meter.

HOW MUCH LOOT IS THERE?
Like, a lot. Every character has a selection of Epic gear in every slot (plus a wealth of common and rare equipment), and there are shaders and abilities galore as well.

Right: Scarecrow's design is ingenious – he's a gas-induced hallucination so the team have been able to go crazy with his customisation options. His are the best and most varied by far. **Below**: Cheetah's rude mixups and crazy damage potential are hard enough to deal with at the best of times, but the Multiverse boss version was *brutal*. Slower characters had a horrible time against her.



INJUSTICE LEAGUE

Guilds are a great addition to the online side of the game, allowing up to 50 players to buddy up in their own clan of sorts and work together towards common goals. Loot boxes are awarded to all member for reaching various (extremely generous) community milestones and on top of that, each Guild has its own Multiverse. The more of its challenges you and your crew complete, the more boxes and buffs you all get – most missions are simple towers that just need to be completed a certain number of times, but Guild Multiverse bosses are a clear and unique highlight. These big bads have ludicrous amounts of HP and can be tackled with backup allies supporting with helpful items and buffs while they wait their turn to chip away at it. Join a Guild if you want to see everything *Injustice 2* has to offer… and to get *loads* of free loot.

BETTER THAN

INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US



AS GOOD AS



MORTAL KOMBAT X

makes the game easier to balance, but it can't help but feel like a step back after *MKX*'s three-styles-per-character solution, and a similar solution would have been preferable here. It's still too early to be calling tier lists but even now, it's clear that some characters simply don't have ways of reliably getting in on others, and without the extra options offered by these additional abilities, those guys aren't likely to see a great deal of competitive play.

The main issue there is that zoners – fighters who control the stage with projectiles and traps – are *extremely* strong in *Injustice 2*. Doctor Fate pretty much exists to chuck stuff at other people, while Deadshot is master of the ragequit, able to lock down a lot of the cast with shots that can reach more or less anywhere on the screen and bullet buffs that can even drain super meter in the process. Characters with fast teleports or similar moves are well equipped to deal with zoners, but everyone else tends to need meter in order to close the gap and avoid being chipped to death in a corner. And that'll happen, too – chip damage is crazy high and even if your blocking is on point, you'll be taking a lot of passive damage as you close in on thing-flingers. In more balanced match-ups, the game's solid systems are far more prevalent and while the dial-a-combo style strings won't be to everyone's tastes, the combo system is flexible and all kinds of crazy juggles are possible with practice and skill.

Lack of content saw genre headliner *Street Fighter V* catch a lot of flak at launch, but *Injustice 2* was never going to fall into the same trap – few developers make fighters packed with more to do than NetherRealm, after all. True to form, there's tons to see and do here, with a cinematic Story mode (secretly the best DC movie in years, daft though it is), constantly updating Multiverse challenges, a comprehensive online suite and something we never knew we wanted until now – AI loadouts. This allows you to gear up a character and modify their attributes by assigning skill points across a number of attitudes and play styles, effectively programming how they will be played in a limited yet effective manner. It's Super Hero Manager 2017, the fighting game equivalent to *Gran Turismo*'s B-Spec races and as well as being a great way to grind out challenges and Trophies with characters you can't use well (or just grab some free loot boxes while you do something else), you'll also find yourself rooting for your creation and cheering them on to bring you home that shiny new loot.

Animation still feels stiff and robotic and zoning might well be too strong as it is now but in most other respects, *Injustice 2* is a clear success. Even with the host of other great fighters released this year, we can still see ourselves coming back for a few loot boxes or multiplayer sessions for the foreseeable future, especially considering how much more DLC characters will add with their new loot. Another cracking fighter from a studio still on the up.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SUITED AND BOOTED: The gear system, while a great incentive to keep playing, is far from perfect in its implementation. It's still rewarding enough to encourage continued play, but you can tell it's the studio's first real attempt at such a system.



VERDICT 8/10



NETHERREALM CONTINUES TO LEVEL UP



THE MORNING AFTER THE NIGHT BEFORE

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War III

There's an unspoken rule in game critique that suggests you should never start a review with a history lesson, but it's somehow pertinent to do so here. See, *Dawn Of War* – as a franchise – has long been seen as a title capable of shifting the expectations of the RTS genre and it's important to acknowledge that going into the third game. The original release created a pure example of the genre, and then the franchise shifted tact with the sequel. *Dawn Of War II* was launched to a great deal of anger from its fanbase, in fact, its devoted subset of players who had wanted 'more of the same' from the sequel rather than the upheaval that many saw the release as. But time was kind and *DoW2* has since gone on to become revered as one of the greatest RTS games of all time. While we can't quite predict the same for this latest addition to the franchise, it is certainly an attempt at overhauling everything that came before. It's not enough to rest on laurels in this industry any more and Relic – at the very least – cannot be accused of that.



Above: *Dawn Of War III* runs the gamut in terms of PC specs, allowing for some great - albeit not outstanding - visuals. There's a potential for a large number of units on screen at any one time, though, and that can kick the performance down a notch. Below: The elite units tower above the otherwise basic units, a handy metaphor for their significance but also a useful beacon for your focus.

Some changes may surprise fans of the previous game, too. Take, for example, the return of base building. While it is much simpler than many comparable titles it's still a change that *DoW2* diehards might not appreciate, a title that was novel and adored for its lack of base building, after all. The concept of looting and its cover system, too, have been dropped, though these both offer little value in a modern RTS environment. The focus here is instead on the larger-than-life hero units, a residual flavour of *Warcraft III* that looms persistently in the strategy genre. A lot of the game's tactics are built around your chosen elite units and how they might interact with the map. Farseer Macha, for example, favours telekinetic abilities, the Space Marines' Gabriel Angelos opts in for the melee while the hulking Morkanaut is a behemoth of a tank with heavy rocket fists and shields. There's a good deal of variety to the different elites, and their impacts on a fight are significant. So much so that it would be safe to consider them overpowered, and while they're by no means unbeatable under the correct counters they're still the only real threats. Their addition doesn't completely dismantle the need for ancillary units, but their importance cannot be downplayed. They can single-handedly control the outcome of your battle, but lose one and you'll find it tough to recover. They can be recalled after a short time, of course, but you'll certainly need to reconsider your plan while you wait for the seconds to count down.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

SWITCHBAIT: This third game is more like a hybrid of its previous two games, bringing in more RTS elements of the original while using elite units in a similar fashion to the sequel's RPG mechanics.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Canada
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Relic Entertainment
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit OS, 3GHz quad core CPU, 4GB RAM, 1GB GPU, 50GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

HALO WARS 2



WORSE THAN

DAWN OF WAR II



However, this new emphasis on elite units combines with more subtle mechanical changes that bring in a quicker pacing and the sense of elation from a more aggressive playstyle. Part of this is thanks to the way resource income slows the more units you have, dramatically slowing your army's growth and essentially commanding you into attacking. The benefit to this is obvious, preventing players from drawing games out as they hope to win through strength of arms. It means that a lost battle doesn't necessarily mean a lost game, either, since with fewer units comes more rapid resource gain and, therefore, a quick influx of units to retaliate against a counter-attack. It's a thrilling back and forth, a sort of rollercoaster of control as one player's position of power is reversed only to swing back around

THERE ARE A LOT OF PEAKS AND TROUGHS TO A GAME OF DAWN OF WAR III, AND THAT IS PERHAPS ITS BIGGEST SUCCESS

THE WAR OF THREE KINGDOMS

While *Dawn Of War III* may well gain some extra factions in the future, the base game comes with three different *Warhammer* factions: the iconic human race of the Space Marines, the green-skinned Orks and the elf-like Eldar. The Space Marines maintain the typical human race traits for any RTS, focusing on their mechs to cause havoc. The Orks are perhaps the strongest of the three, but only after activating a specific ability that gives them an interesting all-in style of play. The Eldar prefer hit and run tactics, their recharging shields giving them free rein to race about the map to cause some damage before escaping before their own forces are destroyed. Each of the factions are distinct enough to add necessary variety to the game, though it's still too early to make a call on balancing.



FAQs

Q. TIME TO COMPLETE?
That's hard to say but a good 15-20 hours depending on skill. There are 17 missions to get through, some longer than others.

Q. AND MULTIPLAYER?
With only one mode and only eight maps there's quite a bit of limitation in this aspect, but that's likely to get better with future updates.

Q. MORE OF A MOBA?
Yes and no. There's a power core to destroy in multiplayer mode that requires one tower to be toppled, but it's still more RTS than Battle Arena.

Below: You'll need to balance your time between frontline micromanagement and careful base building, sometimes requiring you to do both.



again after a short recuperation period. There are a lot of peaks and troughs to a game of *Dawn Of War III*, and that is perhaps its biggest success.

Issues mostly surround the single-player campaign, though. While it'll take a good chunk of your life to complete, there's little in the way of imagination surrounding the events of missions. *Warhammer* lore-buffs will naturally have something to sink their teeth into, but a McGuffin of a powerful artifact is the sole reason the three playable factions are all duking it out – perpetuating the long-accepted belief that an RTS campaign is little more than a long-winded tutorial. It flits between the three factions throughout, which helps to stave off a sense of repetition that is hard to ignore after the eighth barracks are built. The problem is that each of the three races play really quite differently from one another and since some of the later missions can last upwards of two hours, once you've settled into a groove with one faction you're once again having to relearn the best practices of another. Strategy purists might have no issue overcoming this, but it's a tumultuous means of approaching the progress of the campaign that isn't typical in the genre for a reason.

Ultimately *Dawn Of War III* pins its success on the chaos of battle. The reliance on those Elite units plays in contrast with the necessity of base building, the two working symbiotically together but a challenge to successfully achieve simultaneously. Certain structures will help bolster your units, and in that sense the pace of each match can be overwhelming, infuriating even. If you can accept *DoW3*'s fairly unique approach to this, then you'll find a certain dynamism with the game – online or off. In truth not every match will provide that sense of tension caused by the game's rollercoaster of control, some even devolving into little more than two Elite units bashing each other about with limited supplementary fodder in sight. But the games that play out as intended – courtesy of the twists that Relic has brought into the franchise this time around – well, those will stay in your mind as some of the most intense RTS games you'll ever have.



VERDICT 8/10
CHANGES, AND FOR THE BETTER.



GAIDEN DELICIOUS

Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows Of Valentia

Intelligent Systems would surely forgive us all for thinking this was too soon for another *Fire Emblem* game. With the release of *Fates* (three games in one, sort of), this is a series that's gone from being a niche a few people raved about, to a recognised staple of the Nintendo diet.

It's strange and confusing to understand, but as a remake, *Echoes* presents what may be initially considered a more shallow experience, when really it's just different. Removing some of the depth has made *Shadows Of Valentia* feel more accessible than ever, but it's also still familiar to any fan of turn-based RPGs. Every *Fire Emblem* is someone's first, and as starting points go, *Echoes* is a good one.

But let's not kid ourselves, it's not easy to appeal to long-time fans and also be welcoming to newcomers. For those that are always wondering what the new hotness "Fire Emblem" is that the twitter people are always banging on about, it's a mix of dungeon-crawling, turn-based combat, role-playing (relationships, yo!), visual novel (there's a huge amount of text), and just a generally bloody good time.

As the series has grown, the games have become more confident, and option-filled. Should you want to, this is a title that'll last you well over 30 hours: you can watch every attack from your team, and every advance by your foes. If this isn't your first rodeo, you can hit up the options menu and switch all of the animations off, meaning the battles will take place on a map of the area (as always) but the only part of the combat you'll see is your movement and health bars going down after each attack. Enemy turns can be entirely skipped, which can actually mean you'll require better planning so you don't suddenly retake control of your decimated team.

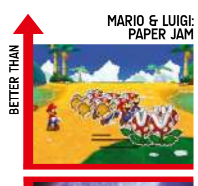
In the other instalments, deep inventory management will be required to ensure every team member has the best equipment for the job, but here you must rely on your weapon. You won't be doing extra damage based on time-honoured class based ideals, it just boils down to who is the strongest. There's no magic or mana; your mages will use HP to cast their white or black magic, so if you are fighting an enemy that is a beast, team up on it and take it down quickly, lest it tear you asunder and render you… well, dead.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Intelligent Systems
PRICE: £32
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

MARIO & LUIGI: PAPER JAM





FIRE EMBLEM AWAKENING

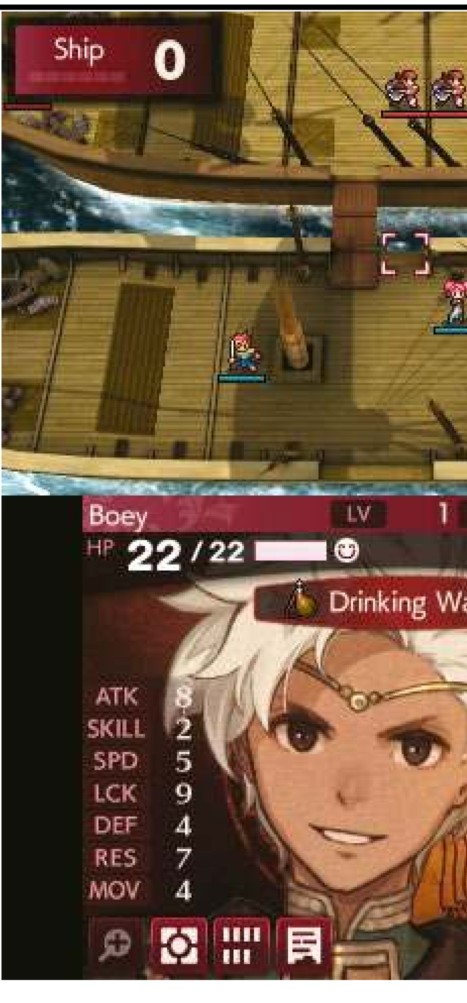
WORSE THAN

The thing about death, in case you weren't aware, is that it's final. Whether you believe in ghosts or not, in *Fire Emblem* dead means dead, sort of. If you want to, you can turn off permadeath and play it your way, but the generally accepted course is to play on normal, with permadeath on, and accept that you'll lose characters you love, and then somehow quickly shut your 3DS down without saving so you can recover them. We jest, of course, but that's because we're not convinced that permadeath actually is the best way forward for everyone.

Options are good, and *Fire Emblem* is not an easy game. The difficulty ramps up slowly, but if you're not meticulous about how you approach a battle, taking your time and spending 10-20 minutes on a single fight, you're going to lose people you care about.

In other games, it wouldn't even matter. You'd lose Clifford "Barry" Barrington, the urchin boy you adopted into your care from his abusive father, whom you have more fondness for than your own children. It matters here, though,

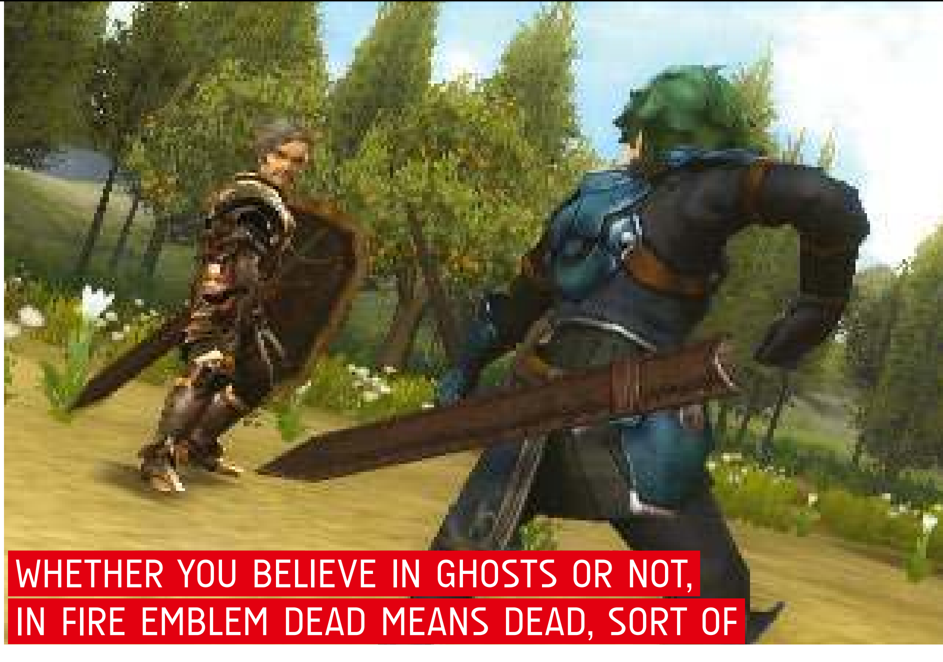




Left: *Echoes* has the same great combat we know and love, but changes it up in subtle ways. Gone is the inventory management and quest to find the best weapon, instead we've got a streamlined process that lets you concentrate on battle.







WHETHER YOU BELIEVE IN GHOSTS OR NOT, IN FIRE EMBLEM DEAD MEANS DEAD, SORT OF



FAQs

Q. WILL NEWCOMERS LIKE ECHOES?

If you like wordy, turn-based RPGs, you'll love this.

Q. ANYTHING ELSE NEW?

Characters get fatigued now, which forces you to vary your party. Bring them back with items to make them happy.

Q. WILL IT HAVE DLC?

Yes, lots. Nintendo has already announced five packs that add new characters and dungeons.

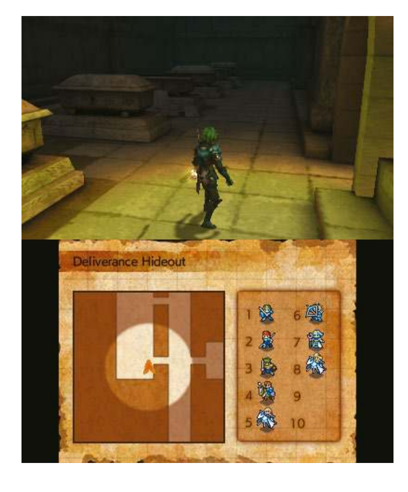
Left: Despite being on 3DS, this isn't a small game. There's loads of voice acting, most of which is exactly as you'd imagine it. It's not stereotypical so much as it's genre appropriate. Expect high-voiced ladies and deep-voiced, burly men. **Below:** The dungeons add a new layer, but unless you want to level up, they'll eventually be places you sprint through.

TWO SIDES TO THE STORY

Splitting the story with two lead protagonists, Alm and Celica come from very different backgrounds. Alm is the poor lad who has an aptitude for fighting, taught by his gruff and stern uncle, while Celica's realm is that of high society. The two story paths come together nicely, but by the end your progress with one character feels slightly forced as the game attempts to bring the two stories together. It's a long game, and very few games can keep you enraptured for 30 hours or more, but the brilliant combat makes up for any time the story falters. It's a minor gripe in an otherwise well written story.

because the characters are memorable and, dare we say it, actually funny now and then.

That said, the story doesn't break new ground. Alm and Celica are childhood friends, separated at a young age by a war, and brought back together by another war. Will they still share their childhood affections now they're all grown up? Will they unite the world because of their friendship? Are they secretly somehow related? We know the answers, and you can probably guess. It's the supporting cast that amuse, even the stereotypical ones. There's the "lady" whose arc goes from snobby to friendly (in record time, actually), and the arrogant noble who thinks you're not fit to join his army and goes ballistic – it's all well written, and often amuses.



What's so interesting about *Echoes* is that it manages to change things up. In many ways the stripping back of weapon management might seem alarming in a deep, hardcore, turn-based strategy game, but now there are dungeons you can explore in 3D. And explore you should, because these are ideal opportunities to level up as you progress through the story, which gives you multiple opportunities to see the bonus XP awarded at the end of a successful fight. You'll know it when you see it, because it never allows you to level up via bonus XP, which feels like a constant stab in the back. Damn you, *Fire Emblem*, you cheeky scamp.

There's actually very little negative to say about *Shadows Of Valentia*. Despite mixing up the mechanics, the core remains the same. During the dungeons, finding items is just a case of pixel scanning and grabbing stuff, which isn't hugely satisfying. But if you've played the series before, this is another rewarding experience that is just about different enough to capture you, but not quite diverse enough to leave you wanting more.

For newcomers, it's a good starting point, but for everyone else, the series probably needs a rest or at least a graphical overhaul, because despite being a good-looking 3DS game with excellent direction during combat, we have an alternative handheld console in the Switch now, which can do far better visuals. Over to you, Nintendo.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PERMADEATH: Where other games will allow you to die and just try again, in *Fire Emblem* your characters won't respawn if they die. Turning permadeath off robs you of the stress caused by trying to keep your friends alive.

VERDICT 8/10

ECHOES WON'T CHANGE MINDS, BUT IT'S STILL A GOOD TIME



Long-range assassinations are the most technical in the game, but could be more challenging still.

ALL GHILLIED UP

Sniper: Ghost Warrior 3

This is a case of Icarus flying too close to the sun. You can't escape the feeling that CI Games has lost its footing while overreaching, when really it should've concentrated on getting the basics right and gone from there. There's a lot of ambition behind *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 3*, which can't be faulted, but that ambition to create an emergent open-world experience in a game that could easily manage without that element means that the developer has had to compromise when it comes to performance.

It's a shame, really, as there's quite a lot to like about *Ghost Warrior 3* if you know where to look. Shooting mechanics, for one, are largely satisfying, and unlocking and kitting yourself out with new ordnance each time you leave a safehouse to go and deal with a target creates a nice sense of progression while encouraging you to experiment a little. Adjustable scope range and elevation for sniper rifles, combined with having to account for wind direction, make long-range assassinations a little more technical, although we think that this could be more difficult.



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: CI Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
SNIPER: GHOST WARRIOR 2



WORSE THAN
SNIPER ELITE 4

All of this promise falls down, though, when you're halfway through infiltrating a grim hotel or oppressed Georgian community and the game crashes. It happens, sure, but rebooting this game means the prospect of sitting through – no joke – five minutes of loading screens.

One influence that permeates *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 3* more than any other is *Far Cry*. Strip away the allure of a tropical island paradise or breezy mountain village, replace it with the windswept, arid tundra of Georgia and you've got a close approximation of this game, its open-world areas littered with Points of Interest to loot and paramilitary outposts to liberate of their heavily-armed guardians. The problem this highlights is that *Ghost Warrior 3*'s structure and design feels largely akin to a franchise that peaked last generation, rather than offering anything strictly original or modern. The storyline leaves quite a lot to be desired, too.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SHOOTING RANGE: We can't help but feel that CI should've made more of the solid shooting mechanics in the game by adding a shooting range or practice mode, to encourage you to explore the best part of the game a little more.

That's just it, really; this game feels a little bit like it belongs on PS3, with its familiar formula, terrible dialogue, dudebro characters, bafflingly ugly cutscenes and cookie-cutter assets. It certainly doesn't make enough of the sniping mechanics that could've been a real selling point here, instead providing equal focus to *Ghost* and *Warrior* mechanics that ultimately make *Ghost Warrior 3* feel like a million other FPS games that have come before it. There's a pretty good game hidden somewhere in here, but you'll have to look quite hard at times.



VERDICT 5/10
AN AMBITIOUS, BUT FORGETTABLE SHOOTER

BEST LEFT ON ICE

Syberia 3



Above: The game borrows a couple of ideas from other games: Telltale's choice-based dialogue system and the option to listen to Kate's thoughts whenever she is presented with a choice, as in *Dreamfall Chapters*. Bad writing means neither system is used to its full potential.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Anuman
DEVELOPER: Microïds
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
FIGHTER WITHIN

WORSE THAN
DREAMFALL CHAPTERS

Early on in *Syberia 3*, we were able to run through a locked gate behind which we were supposed to be trapped. Later, we had to restart the game mid-way through a puzzle after it froze solid. At one point, protagonist Kate Walker admonishes someone for "watching" a soap opera. On a radio. Characters are fond of performing a little teleportation dance at the start of a scene before finding their proper place. Dialogue will occasionally play out of sync. This collage of disaster should give you a feel for what you can expect from *Syberia 3*.

The game carries straight on from where *Syberia II* left off in 2004. It doesn't bother with a recap to get you up to speed, so be prepared to read some plot synopses if you are masochistic enough to plan on playing it. Protagonist Kate Walker quickly gets involved in the Youkol tribe's quest to accompany their snow ostriches on a migration to their breeding grounds in the face of forces doing everything they can to stop them. You'll never care about this task, nor the people involved in it, thanks to terrible dialogue delivered via some of the worst voice acting we've heard in recent years. It doesn't help that audio will sometimes cut out halfway through a word and jump back in a second or two later, but even if those technical issues were absent, you'd still be left with paper-thin characters and terrible performances that scupper any hope of getting invested in the game's story.

The game's one redeeming feature is that it does have some good puzzles. Don't get too excited, though, because there are also plenty that rely on you finding items placed in obscure locations, as if to deliberately annoy the player. Many puzzles are based around a physics system that allows you to push, pull, turn, and move objects, levers, handles, and so on. This system creates such thrilling and memorable moments as that bit where you shuffle some stuff around in a drawer to find an item underneath a pile of paperwork, that bit where you shuffle some stuff around in a box to find an item underneath a pile of miscellany, and that bit where you get pissed off fiddling around trying to plug a hose into a slot. Expect to have your patience tested far more frequently than your grey matter.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FEELING BAD: *Syberia 3* doesn't get the feel of interacting with objects through its physics system right. Whether that's an inherent limitation of the DualShock 4 when it comes to a system clearly designed for PC isn't clear, but the fact is that it doesn't work.



Getting to the handful of good puzzles *Syberia 3* has isn't worth it for all the rubbish you'll have to wade through. This is a jittery, stuttering, mess of a videogame. Its locations are dull and badly designed, its characters are boring, and its systems are badly implemented. Even if you can avoid the technical issues that plague the PS4 version by picking it up on PC, it won't change the fact that this is fundamentally a bad game.

VERDICT 2/10
A FAILURE ON A TECHNICAL AND ARTISTIC LEVEL



Above: Kate stands alongside her Youkol friends and looks ahead to the next stage of their journey.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Switch
OTHER FORMATS: PS4
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Deep Silver
DEVELOPER: Sega
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (2-4 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

AS GOOD AS — TETRIS ULTIMATE

WORSE THAN — PUZZLE QUEST 2

BLOBZILLA CRASHES THE BLOCK PARTY

Puyo Puyo Tetris

Puzzle game crossovers aren't common, and it's easy to think that this is because they just don't work. However, *Puyo Puyo Tetris* quickly dispels any such notion – not only does the game function as a full-featured version of each of its individual components, it blends them in satisfying ways.

Crossover modes range from simple Puyo versus Tetris matches to the Fusion mode, in which you place pieces from both games onto the same board. Puyo blobs rise to the top like oil on water, which means that placing Tetris blocks can start combos simply by rearranging what's on top of them. It's deeply complex and a struggle to play unless you've mastered both games. The Swap mode, in which you alternate between each game every 30 seconds or so, is easier to comprehend – the trick here is that your last move will continue to completion after you swap, enabling you to create lines and match Puyos simultaneously.

There's something deeply deceptive about *Puyo Puyo Tetris*. The exterior appearance is



Above: No matter which mode you're playing, the fundamentals of the game never change – a full horizontal line in Tetris will clear, and four or more Puyos will pop and disappear when placed together.



one of saccharine sweetness; cute characters utter lines like "Pipi-pi!" against primary coloured cartoon backdrops. This is what you'll encounter during the single player adventure mode, which helps you get to grips with each game mode. But the heart of *Puyo Puyo Tetris* is its multiplayer modes, and the game's facade melts away once things get competitive. The **games™** office has become a battleground, with well-timed attacks and counterattacks inspiring some venomous declarations of hatred. Online play uses solid netcode, and is just as vicious as local multiplayer, if not more so – you'll be pummelled if your skills aren't up to scratch.

It takes a lot for a falling block puzzle game to impress today, but *Puyo Puyo Tetris* succeeds thanks to its comprehensive set of options and satisfying skill-based game design.



A PERFECT PUZZLE PAIRING

MASTER SYSTEM CLASSIC REMADE WITH LOVE

Wonder Boy: The Dragon's Trap

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Nintendo Switch, Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: DotEmu
DEVELOPER: Lizardcube
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



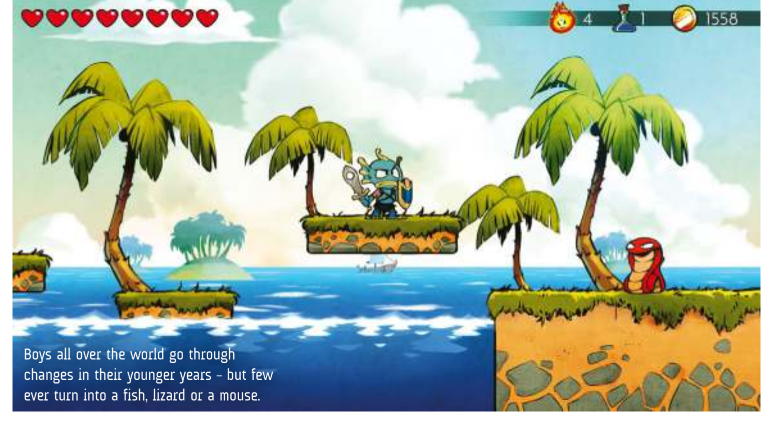
BETTER THAN — CASTLE OF ILLUSION STARRING MICKEY MOUSE

WORSE THAN — RATCHET & CLANK

To look at *Wonder Boy: The Dragon's Trap* is to see several years of dedication and affection splashed across the screen. French studio Lizardcube's remake of the 1989 Sega Master System game is beautiful, its fluidly animated hand-drawn visuals complemented perfectly by a gently swelling orchestral score.

What it's not is anything more than the source material in terms of level structure, moment-to-moment gameplay and difficulty curve – and at the touch of a button, the player can revert to the 8-bit original. This is essentially a terrific respray, then, playing atop the older game; as such, it's incredibly faithful to the Sega title.

What problems *The Dragon's Trap* had in 1989, its 2017 remake retains. Certain platforming sequences can be more infuriating than testing, especially when the shape-shifting protagonist's slippery foothold lets him down. (Or her down – in this version, you can be a Wonder Girl). Tough bosses are to be expected – but marching back through entire levels when you fail to beat them is a chore.



Boys all over the world go through changes in their younger years – but few ever turn into a fish, lizard or a mouse.

Each boss is a dragon, the game's title referencing a curse placed upon the protagonist within the first few minutes – they lose their human form, becoming, in turn, a lizard, mouse, piranha, lion and hawk. Each character type carries singular abilities, though, essential for reaching previously inaccessible areas. Piranha-Man can swim and Hawk-Man can fly, obviously. Less obviously, Mouse-Man can stick to specially marked walls and ceilings – essential for discovering a magical item that you cannot finish the game without.

That said item is off the beaten track, and there's no indication you need it until you actually find it, is another hangover from a wholly different era of game design. But while many will curse its archaic elements, there's an undeniable definitiveness to *The Dragon's Trap* – this is absolutely the best version of what was a Master System essential. Its makers' love is evident in abundance – perhaps enough to forgive its more obsolescent aspects.



A GORGEOUS BUT SOMETIMES GALLING NOSTALGIA TRIP

A RESTRAINED VR EXPERIENCE

Statik





Above: Some of the puzzles can have three or four stages to them, each section unlocking the next interaction. Their inputs vary from turning dials to aligning shapes, matching audio and more.

You hang around for a decade hoping to see Tarsier release a new IP of its own and suddenly two come along in a week. And what's more, they're both belters. Having impressed us with *Little Nightmares*, this VR puzzler is a 180 degree turn, but it's no less impressive, immersive, unsettling and engaging.

The core premise of *Statik* is one of those great 'how has no one thought of this before' moments with your first person perspective revealing that your hands, wrapped around the DualShock 4 as far as you're aware, are actually trapped inside a box. Each button, stick and trigger on the PS4's controller may or may not trigger something on the box to move or interact with something else. You can't see the connections. There's no guide to what they may do (although there may be clues hidden around the room). You just sit there with your hands trapped, having to work it out.

What this means in practice is a puzzle experience that feels innately uncomfortable and unnerving. Your standard, comfortable seating position with controller in hand is subverted into constraints from which you cannot escape. You can't stand up and you can't move your hands, no matter how many buttons you press or how much you struggle. This is a pretty genius idea and it's supplemented by some nicely ambiguous dialogue, moments of complete silence that feel like they're the portent of impending doom and then suddenly a rising swell of music that makes you feel even worse.

This isn't a jump scare horror experience, in case that's something of a concern. No monsters lurk in dark corners and the lab technician running the tests, face blurred out, isn't going to leap at you with a scalpel. He will, however, sit there quietly sipping from his mug, jotting down notes. Once again, it's his lack of interaction that ends up being rather effective.

There is of course a deeper mystery and narrative to be revealed here as the puzzles unfold and the purpose of them is introduced. Even more interesting is that there are hidden clues to meta puzzles that unlock further into the game. We won't say much more about that as it's a convoluted and curious journey to go on, but rest assured there are trophies at the end of it all to act as reward.

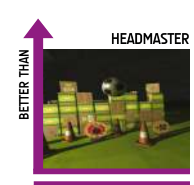
The puzzles themselves all offer a new challenge and some of the toughest are those that use the least number of buttons and prompts from the controller. It ramps up brilliantly and is nicely paced too. With the game taking maybe two or three hours depending on how quickly you solve things we'd say it's a good length for a VR game too. It might not have the intense insanity of a *Keep Talking*, but it's up there with some of the best implementation of PSVR we've seen to date.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PSVR
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Tarsier Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

HEADMASTER





KEEP TALKING AND NOBODY EXPLODES

WORSE THAN

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

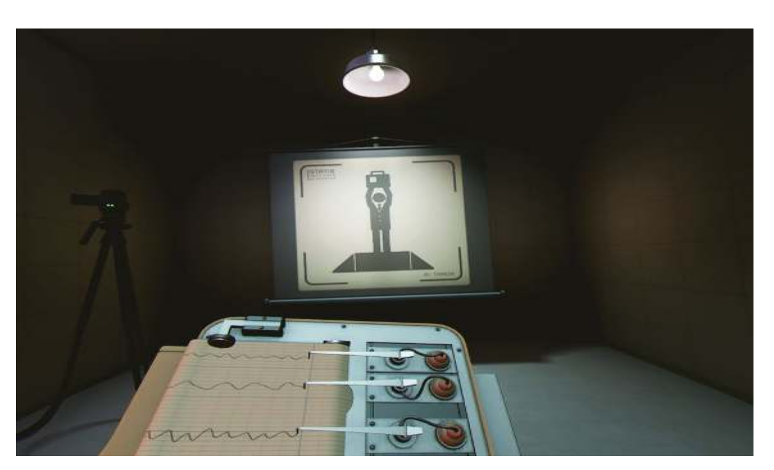
NOTHING WASTED: We're fairly certain that the only functionality of the DualShock 4 that isn't put to use in *Statik* is the touchpad. Tilt is obviously important and every button can play a role.

VERDICT 8/10

SMART, FUNNY, TENSE AND UNIQUE

Below: It's always a good idea to have a look around the room for contextual clues or elements you might be able to interact with. Sometimes they won't come into play until later, but you can note them.





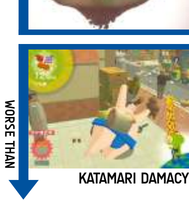
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Double Fine
DEVELOPER: David O'Reilly
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

MOUNTAIN





KATAMARI DAMACY

WORSE THAN

ALL CREATURES GREAT AND SMALL

Everything

It was very easy for us to fall in love with *Everything* since it touches on so many gaming styles that we've found infinitely appealing in recent years, but what sets it apart is how unlike anything we've played before it really is.

On the surface it's a game about discovery for its own sake as you leap from creature to creature to object, up and down in scale as if you're collecting the experience of inhabiting these objects. It seems rather aimless in a way, not far removed from the initial release of *No Man's Sky*, but there's so many more layers you can reveal with time.

Every animal and object in the game (and we hazard to suggest there may be thousands) is animated in the most basic terms. Animation may even strike you as too strong a term for the way your sheep will roll, stiff as a board, head over heels in whatever direction you point it. But this oddly lifeless form of movement brings to mind the endlessly charming *Katamari* series, so no harm there.

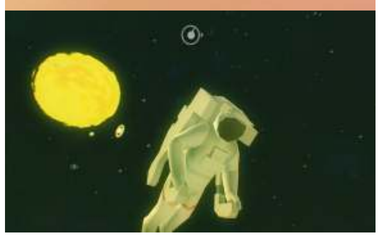
What binds it all together and elevates *Everything* considerably is the philosophical side of the game (that is ultimately supported brilliantly by the gameplay once you master it) in the form of snippets of audio from the late British philosopher Alan Watts. This element reminded us a little of *The Witness*, but this has been far more tightly bound into the experience.

Everything is a game about how connected the universe is, from an atom to a galaxy, with every size and scale of thing around it and within it. Exploring *Everything*'s scale and depth alone will likely be intriguing enough to keep you going, but once you begin to find its hidden oddities the philosophy and mind-bending structure another level is revealed. It's all pretty stripped back and its focus is laser sharp. If the animation and lack of traditional structure is something likely to rub you the wrong way, we wouldn't judge you. But if you have a head for it we recommend checking this strange experience out.

VERDICT 7/10
WILLFULLY WEIRD AND CAPTIVATING







Above: Every type of item in the game can interact and 'dance' with others of its type, from cows to trees and from atoms to planets. It's strange to watch, but also rather hypnotic as they form new shapes and patterns.

FORTUNE FAVOURS THE CAVE

Scanner Sombre

Let's get it out of the way first; anyone who uses the term walking simulator as a form of insult can quietly leave now. Yep, off you pop. The rise in short experiential games such as *Gone Home* and, more recently, *What Remains Of Edith Finch*, show just how rich in potential our medium can be when it comes to storytelling. Happily, *Scanner Sombre* is no different. While short at only three hours, not only does *Prison Architect* studio Introversion Software manage to deliver a swift underground scary tale but also one of the most beautiful and unique experiences we've had in years.

While being plunged into complete darkness is par for the horror course, the first thing *Scanner Sombre* does is hand you a visor and, well, a *scanner*. Wandering into the dark and holding the right trigger will send lasers onto the walls of your surroundings, lighting your path in a sea of blues, greens and reds. Stalactites and stalagmites appear like magic as you swing through the darkness, literally painting the world into existence. You'll quickly learn which colours indicate how close you are to walls and dangerous precipices. Yeah, mind the gap… While red indicates something is directly in front, blue is an enticing beckoning finger drawing you forward. Like a playable optical illusion, it's a surreal and staggeringly pretty experience. And that's before more recognisable *shapes* start to loom out of the darkness.

It's not quite perfect though. While regular updates to your scanner keep things surprisingly fresh, and a threatening attempt at deeper horror than just oppressive caves hits the right fear spots, there's a sense that more could have been done. A puzzle in the final act hints at what could have been and, despite a satisfying story conclusion, there's a niggle that Introversion hasn't quite made the most of its beautiful toybox. Regardless, this is an atmospheric trip underground that you'll immediately want to shine light on again.

VERDICT 7/10
A BEAUTIFUL TECHNICOLOR JOURNEY INTO DARKNESS

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Introversion Software
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £8.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

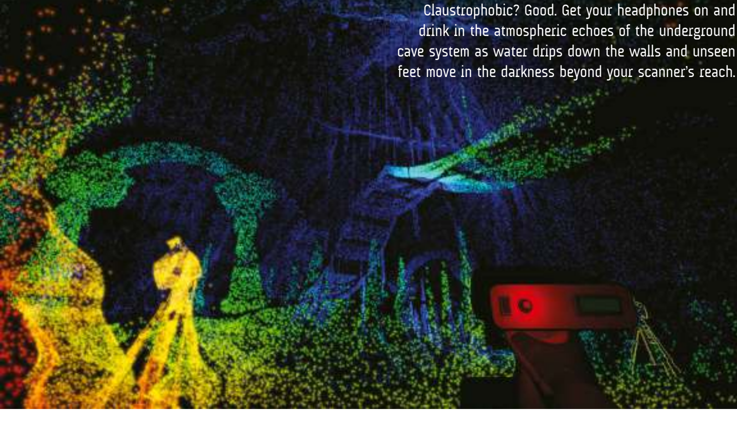
THE PARK





GONE HOME

WORSE THAN



Claustrophobic? Good. Get your headphones on and drink in the atmospheric echoes of the underground cave system as water drips down the walls and unseen feet move in the darkness beyond your scanner's reach.

ROBOT WARS

The Surge

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Germany
PUBLISHER: Focus Home Interactive
DEVELOPER: Deck13 Interactive
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: LORDS OF THE FALLEN

WORSE THAN: BLOODBORNE

What an interesting prospect this is. *The Surge*'s blend of action-RPG nuance and sci-fi hack-and-slash insanity sounded like risky business to us, but give it a few hours, find your way through the familiar but secretly super different levelling mechanics, weapon upgrades and more, and there's a really good game in here.

Don't get too excited about the plot or wider lore – you'll spend most of your time smashing other exo-suit-wearing nutters with a variety of primitive items, from pipe-like metal staffs to huge shards of steel that you've nicked off the corpse of a boss. Combat takes a little bit of getting used to before you realise that it's all about rythym. R1 and R2 attacks can be chained more or less indefinitely (stamina permitting), and manipulating the right stick after locking on to an enemy allows you to target individual parts of an enemy, mercilessly exploiting weak points in a way that becomes more satisfying as you advance further into the game.

We thought that enemy variety was a little disappointing, really, with quite a few feeling very cookie cutter, and the boss fights that are scattered sparingly throughout the various world hubs can be horribly frustrating until you learn to manipulate the RNG effectively (at which point they become pretty rudimentary). However, becoming au fait with the *Bloodborne*-style dodging, the strangely graceful combat moves and brutal finishers is something you'll savour after a few hours. It's different in a good way – the fast dodging coupled with slow, dance-like attacking is an unorthodox combo but it works.

Ultimately, to simply dub this a Souls-like feels lazy. The similarities between *The Surge* and *Lords Of The Fallen* are clear – the exaggerated aesthetic, the undeniably weighty combat and movement, the structure and pacing – and this is, we feel, testament to Deck13 taking one of the most in vogue types of game and forging its own little tropes and systems that it could easily apply to a sequel to either of the aforementioned, or adapt again for yet another IP.

Lords Of The Fallen was an approximation of *Dark Souls*; *The Surge* is a mechanically better version of *Lords* in a new, more diverse setting, and a version that has moved away from trying to recreate the minutiae of From Software's dark fantasy opus in favour of developing its own little niche in a crowded batch of mechanical forerunners. It's not without its problems, but if you're a fan of action RPGs, or just a sci-fi fan, there's plenty to enjoy here.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MECHA SOULS: Many people have been clamouring for a *Dark Souls*-style RPG set in the future, and while the comparison is a little laboured, this is the closest you'll get until From Software ditches dragons for androids.



Above: Combat can take a bit of getting used to. After a while you realise that it's all about rythym, and you can learn to target the weaker points of your enemy.





Above: You'll spend a lot of your time smashing up other exo-suit-wearing nutters.


VERDICT 7/10

A CHALLENGING AND FRESH TAKE ON SCI-FI

UNCOVER THE SECRETS OF THE FINCH'S PAST

What Remains Of Edith Finch

Houses take on the personalities of their owners. The Finch house is crowded with them. Each one waits in the sealed-up rooms that whisper of the family history secrets kept from Edith. Now she's returned home to get the answers her mother hid from her.

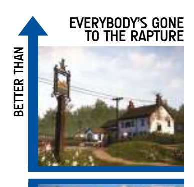
She hid them well. Each bedroom in this narrative walking simulator belonged to a now-dead family member and has been sealed up, the only way to see inside being a peephole installed in a commemorative plaque. Tantalising you with an initial glimpse of the room before you find a way in, peeping in ignites a rabid curiosity, the distorted view making each room look dreamlike.

That is, until you crawl inside through one of the secret passages. As no tutorial springs on you at the beginning, you're left to figure out the perfectly-weighted controls alone. A small detail, it fosters a sense of discovery right from the start. The same sensation that Edith feels returning to her family home, in fact. Each push of the analog stick when Edith is grasping a door handle or book is different, the varied amounts of pressure needed showing their weight. Paired with the zoom-in ability and the slow walking pace, the house feels tangible.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA, California
PUBLISHER: Annapurna Pictures
DEVELOPER: Giant Sparrow
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
EVERYBODY'S GONE TO THE RAPTURE



AS GOOD AS



THE WITNESS



So does the past. Each shrine you find kickstarts a flashback in the form of a minigame. Telling the last moments of one of Edith's dead relatives, you're complicit in their deaths yet are shown how inevitable they were. The creativity and variation of each one is astonishing, managing to convey the personality of whichever family member you're playing as. Despite knowing it was going to end in death, the sheer exhilaration of the games makes it impossible to feel morbid. The 'replay a story' option means you can relive the family stories Edith has yearned for. This reiterates that Edith is getting what she wants at last: unrestricted access to her family history.

One family member's game feels like a sell-out as it's just a flipbook, and leaving out certain key characters who deserve their own minigame judging by how important they were to the story is a disappointment. However, the saturation of props in each bedroom means you can sense what each relative was like, from individual book titles down to the random objects strewn on a desk.

After Edith finishes reminiscing, the text whooshes up the fireplace. A neat bit of animation at first, what it really shows is that her words are one with the house. They build her memories, construct the past around your ears while the portraits on the walls and the book titles whisper the anecdotes she doesn't mention. The Finch home doesn't have secrets anymore. But it'll always have those personalities waiting inside.

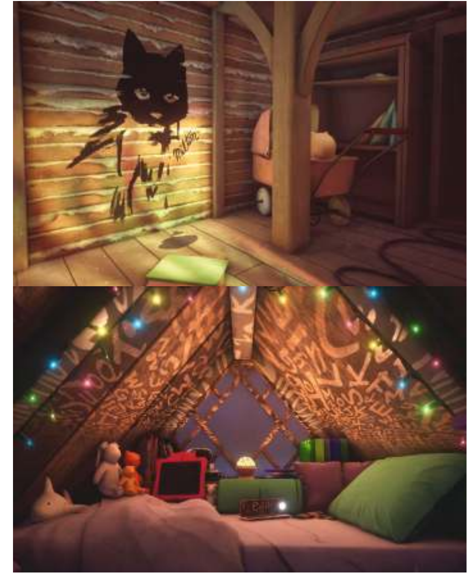
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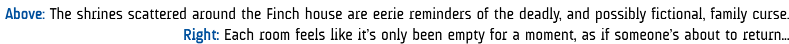
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MORE COMMENTARY: Hearing Edith's perspective on more bits of the house would bring it alive even more.
FAMILY HISTORY: Characters marrying into the Finch family deserve their own minigames too.

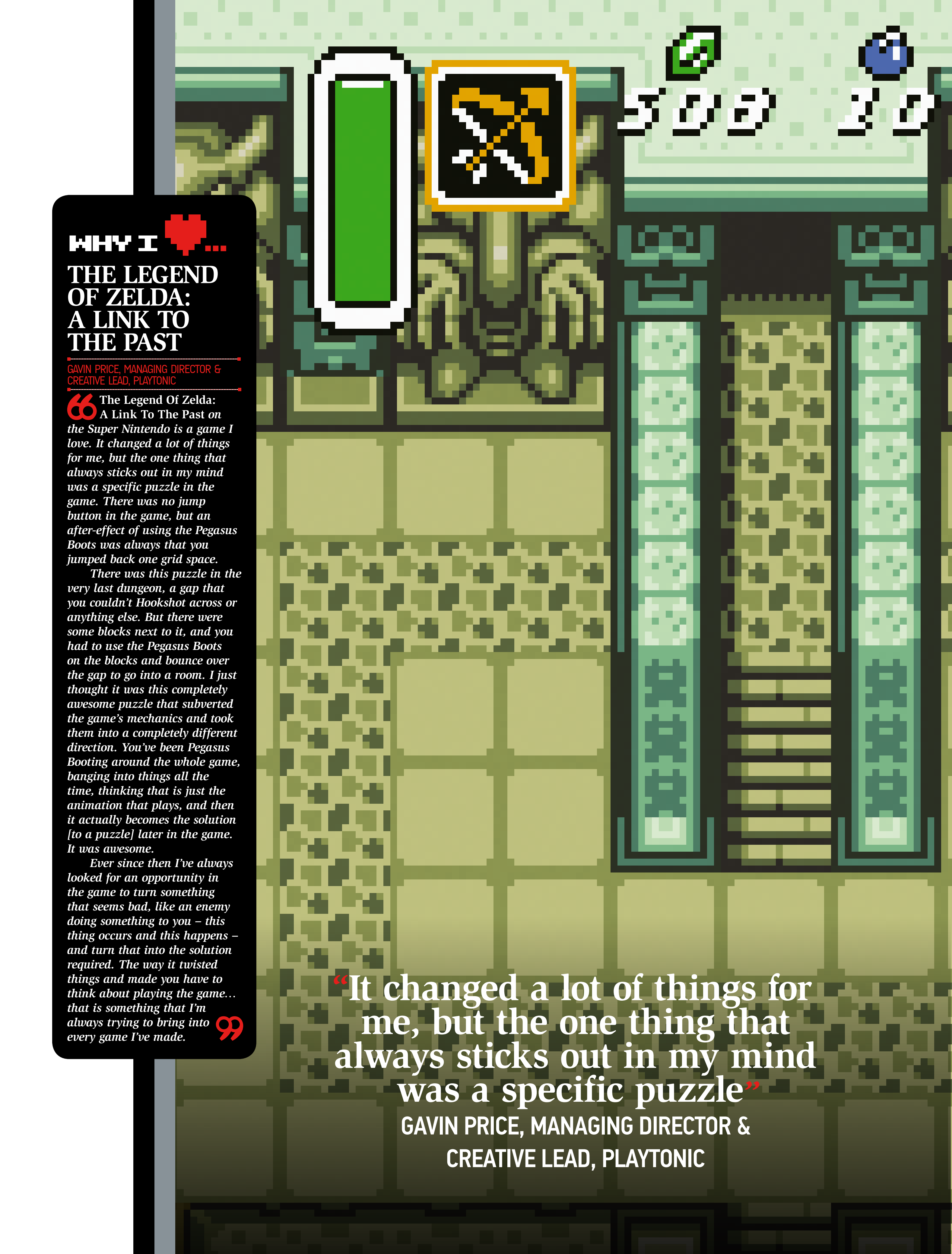
VERDICT 9/10
A TENDER EXPLORATION OF MEMORY, DEATH, AND MYSTERY







Above: The shrines scattered around the Finch house are eerie reminders of the deadly, and possibly fictional, family curse.
Right: Each room feels like it's only been empty for a moment, as if someone's about to return...



WHY I ♥...

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK TO THE PAST

GAVIN PRICE, MANAGING DIRECTOR & CREATIVE LEAD, PLAYTONIC

"The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past *on the Super Nintendo is a game I love. It changed a lot of things for me, but the one thing that always sticks out in my mind was a specific puzzle in the game. There was no jump button in the game, but an after-effect of using the Pegasus Boots was always that you jumped back one grid space.*

There was this puzzle in the very last dungeon, a gap that you couldn't Hookshot across or anything else. But there were some blocks next to it, and you had to use the Pegasus Boots on the blocks and bounce over the gap to go into a room. I just thought it was this completely awesome puzzle that subverted the game's mechanics and took them into a completely different direction. You've been Pegasus Booting around the whole game, banging into things all the time, thinking that is just the animation that plays, and then it actually becomes the solution [to a puzzle] later in the game. It was awesome.

Ever since then I've always looked for an opportunity in the game to turn something that seems bad, like an enemy doing something to you – this thing occurs and this happens – and turn that into the solution required. The way it twisted things and made you have to think about playing the game… that is something that I'm always trying to bring into every game I've made."

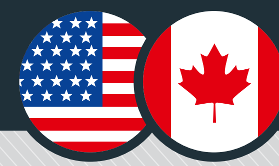
"It changed a lot of things for me, but the one thing that always sticks out in my mind was a specific puzzle"

GAVIN PRICE, MANAGING DIRECTOR & CREATIVE LEAD, PLAYTONIC



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THE RETRO GUIDE TO... MORTAL KOMBAT

Midway's bloodthirsty series has been entertaining gamers for 25 years. Discover how a planned competitor to Street Fighter became a contender in its own right



MORTAL KOMBAT IS quite an interesting franchise as it's one that has generally improved with each successive instalment. Yes there have been some huge stumbles along the way (most of the spin-offs, for example, are absolute garbage) but the core games have tended to always improve on the original formulae, which was gore, gore and even more gore.

Created by Ed Boon and John Tobias as a competitor to Capcom's phenomenally successful *Street Fighter II*, Midway's brawler mainly relied on two things to wow gamers in the arcades: its realistic digitised characters; and an unhealthy amount of over-the-top blood and guts that immediately made it stand apart from virtually every other game of the time. Sure the animation was incredibly ropey and naff in the first game, and the block button was a pain in the arse to get used to, but the imaginative setting, stylised characters and the ability to perform insane Fatality moves, that ranged from ripping out your hapless foe's heart to stripping them of their spines, ensured there was no shortage of players that wanted to tackle Midway's game.

Its success saw Midway continue to expand the series with additional games that would continue to add new characters, add even more outlandish finishing moves and even spin off into new genres (admittedly with very little success). It even moved into other entertainment areas in the form of films and comics. So join us as we look at the high (and low) points of the bloody popular series.



MORTAL KOMBAT 1992

ARCADE, VARIOUS

The original *Mortal Kombat* caused a massive stir upon its release, ushering in awareness of just how graphically capable videogames were becoming, and proved that you didn't need to have amazing game mechanics in order to be popular.

Up against *Street Fighter II*, *Mortal Kombat* was clearly the inferior game, but gamers didn't seem to care. Unlike many fighters of the time, Midway's game featured a block button that instantly made you rethink how you approached matches. Its character roster was interesting too, featuring everything from a Hollywood movie star (Johnny Cage) to a trio of deadly ninjas (Sub-Zero, Scorpion and secret character Reptile) and the god of lightning (Raiden). Each character in the game was portrayed by a real-life actor, using Midway's state-of-the-art digitising techniques. There was even a half-decent story at the heart of all the fighting that explained how all the fighters were competing in a deadly tournament in the hope of overthrowing the evil sorcerer Shang Tsung and his four-armed protector Goro. Perhaps the biggest draw of Midway's game, though, was the insane amount of blood and guts it featured, the most important of which were its Fatalities, which were available upon winning your second bout against your opponent. Your helpless foe would stagger for a few seconds allowing you to hopefully pull off an insanely devastating attack move that would instantly kill them.

The controversy surrounding the likes of *Mortal Kombat*, *Night Trap* and *Lethal Enforcers* (all of which featured digitised human characters) was so great that it led to the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) being formed. Ratings started to appear on the boxes of games, so consumers knew whether they would be suitable for their children to play or not. Hugely successful in arcades, *Mortal Kombat* found similar success in the home market, particularly on the Mega Drive and SNES. Nintendo's strict rules at the time meant that the blood on the SNES version was replaced with less controversial sweat, giving Sega's console a much-needed boost over its competitor.





MORTAL KOMBAT II 1993

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Midway's sequel was a massive improvement over the original, offering better fighting mechanics, a larger roster of characters and all sorts of new finishing moves, ranging from Babalities (which turned your opponent into a baby) to Friendships (a non-malicious finish, such as presenting your defeated foe with a cake).

The move set of each character was greatly improved making it a far more expansive game that featured a lot more strategy than its predecessor. Five new playable characters were also introduced, swelling the roster to 12. Kitana and Mileena were twin sisters and deadly ninjas, Baraka was a fearsome fighter that fought with deadly blades, Jackson 'Jax' Briggs was a Special Forces officer who was attempting to rescue Sonya Blade, while Kung Lao was a Shaolin monk whose hat could literally split opponents in half. Reptile was now immediately available, and Shang Tsung joined the cast as well (in addition to serving as a sub-boss) to Kintaro, a four-armed Goro replacement and Shao Kahn, the evil Emperor of Outworld. Hidden characters appeared in the form of Jade (a green-clad female ninja), Noob Saibot (a dark, smoky ninja) and Smoke (a grey-clad ninja), providing that you could work out how to unlock them.

Filled with an insane amount of secrets, including the now infamous 'Toasty', *Mortal Kombat II* was another commercial and critical success, with the home conversions being equally well received. Unlike the original *Mortal Kombat*, the SNES version had none of the gore removed, and many consider it to be the definitive home version.





MORTAL KOMBAT 3 1995

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Mortal Kombat 3 continued to define the gameplay mechanics that would lead to it becoming just as competitive a series as *Street Fighter*. Characters were now able to run, a mechanic that quickly solved the problem of the heavily defensive play that had featured predominantly in the earlier games, while new chain combos were also possible. A 'Run Meter' was also introduced, adding to the game's strategy. Realising that it needed to appeal to as many types of players as possible, *Mortal Kombat 3* also added different skill levels, while 'Kombat Kodes' were a new unlockable system that could be entered before two-player matches to modify the gameplay or allow the player to fight hidden characters. The Fatalities from the earlier games had been massively upgraded and were even more ridiculous, while 'Mercy' and 'Animality' moves were introduced (the latter of which would turn opponents into animals when successfully performed).

The graphics were greatly refined compared to the earlier games and many of the backgrounds were now pre-rendered using 3D graphics. The whole styling too was far more contemporary and Western-based than the earlier games, thanks to backdrops like churches and highways, and it was possible to knock characters through the roofs of certain levels, leading to new locations to fight in. Seven new characters were introduced, while a number of characters' looks changed due to being portrayed by new actors (the original actors left due to pay disputes over royalties).

Just over a year after *Mortal Kombat 3* made its arcade debut, Midway released *Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3*, which added many of the popular characters from *Mortal Kombat II* that had been missing in the original game, as well as new levels, tweaked gameplay and a brand new eight-player tournament mode. Both versions of *Mortal Kombat 3* were ported to home systems with various degrees of success.







MORTAL KOMBAT TRILOGY 1996

VARIOUS

It's best to consider *Trilogy* as the ultimate remix for the home consoles that were available at the time. While it featured much of the same gameplay as *Mortal Kombat 3* it also added all the missing characters from the other three arcade game, including *Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3*. Two new secret characters were available, while many of the existing characters had brand new specials and finishing moves. New mechanics appeared in the form of the 'Aggressor Bar' (which would let a character move faster and hit harder for a certain amount of time) and a 'Brutality', which caused your opponent to explode if you could pull off an 11-button combo in time.



MORTAL KOMBAT 4 1997

ARCADE, VARIOUS

Mortal Kombat 4 would be the last time that the popular series would make its debut in the arcades. It's notable for many other reasons, though. It's the first game in the series to be in full 3D and the first to feature Fatalities being played from different camera angles. Eight new characters were introduced to the series, including Shinnok (who would double up as the game's final boss) as well as ten returning characters, including Johnny Cage, Liu Kang, Sub-Zero and Scorpion.

Each character was also able to activate a weapon and it was possible to pick up an opponent's weapon and use it against them. *Mortal Kombat 4* also introduced a 'Maximum Damage' cap which prevented players from performing annoying infinite combos. The home console versions (with the exception of the Game Boy Color release) were well received at the time, but the later *Mortal Kombat Gold*, an enhanced version for Sega's new Dreamcast console, performed poorly and was largely slammed by critics.

MORTAL KOMBAT MYTHOLOGIES: SUB-ZERO 1997

PLAYSTATION, N64

Every big franchise eventually expands its user base in an attempt to take the series in new and exciting directions. Sometimes the result is *Super Mario Kart*, other times it's a steaming fresh pile of excrement like *Mortal Kombat Mythologies: Sub-Zero*.

Conceptually, the idea behind *Mythologies* was a sound one: take a beloved character from the earlier games, use a similar combat engine to the one found in the popular arcade games, but place the action in scrolling levels where there is the ability to gain experience points that will power-up your hero's special moves. It was a great idea, but the execution of *Mythologies* was absolutely terrible.

Combat was laughably simplistic, the enemies you fought offer very little challenge, while the level design throughout was incredibly lacklustre. The plot was relatively interesting, being set before the original arcade game, but it's certainly not of a high enough standard that you'll want to complete the game to see how it ends. We're sure we remember reading about other planned games in the *Mythologies* series, but the poor reception of *Sub-Zero*'s first and only standalone game killed any other releases. Still, at least we've been paid to revisit it.





MORTAL KOMBAT: SPECIAL FORCES 2000

PLAYSTATION

There's a reason *Special Forces* has a pathetic score of 28% on Metacritic. In fact there are many reasons, but we don't have the space, or the time, to bother listing them all. This PlayStation exclusive was another misguided attempt by *Mortal Kombat* co-creator John Tobias to take the popular series in new directions. Unfortunately, it's another miserable stab at an adventure platformer that completely misses what made the franchise so popular in the first place.

Credit to Tobias for wanting to do something a little different, but we're wondering what made him think that creating an entire game around one of the franchise's least popular characters could win over fans. Like many 3D games of the time, *Special Forces* suffered from an abominable camera that does its best to make your fights as frustrating as possible. *Special Forces* was originally earmarked for the N64 and Dreamcast, but both games were cancelled. Bullet dodged we say.





MORTAL KOMBAT ADVANCE 2001

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Talented developers such as Crawfish proved it was entirely possible to port button-heavy fighters like *Street Fighter Alpha 3* over to Nintendo's portable handheld with very little loss in playability. Unfortunately for *Mortal Kombat* fans, it was Virtucraft that was behind *Mortal Kombat Advance* and it made a right pig's ear of it.

Despite the title there's nothing advanced about *Mortal Kombat Advance*. In fact, it's not even a new game, being a rather atrocious port of *Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3*. While it featured the same character roster as its 16-bit counterparts, every other aspect of the game had been compromised in some way. Various stages were completely missing, 'Stage Fatalities' were nowhere to be seen, while virtually every character only had one Fatality move. The gore had been notably toned down in this instalment, while the GBA's lack of buttons meant that not all standard moves were available.

While these omissions were understandable, the complete lack of timing of many of the game's moves, as well as its insane difficulty level wasn't. It is utter garbage and completely forgettable.





MORTAL KOMBAT: DEADLY ALLIANCE 2002

VARIOUS

After a couple of failed spin-offs in the form of *Mythologies* and *Special Forces*, Midway Games got its killer franchise back on track with Ed Boon's impressive *Deadly Alliance*.

Unlike earlier versions of *Mortal Kombat*, *Deadly Alliance* gave each character three individual fighting styles, one of which was weapon-based. Each style was vastly different to each other and could be switched between at the press of a button. Special moves were dialled back, so that the fighting styles played a bigger part in your fighter's success, while many levels contained obstacles that could be used to damage your opponent. Each character only had one Fatality, but they're all incredibly gory and not too difficult to pull off.

Best of all, though, was the introduction of 'Konquest Mode', which not only acted as a tutorial for each of the 24 new characters (including 11 new brawlers) but also expanded the franchise's storyline. Each character's back story was revealed through a series of missions that earned the player 'koins' that can be spent in the 'Krypt', a tomb of 676 Koffins that were filled with numerous secrets and unlockables.



MORTAL KOMBAT: TOURNAMENT EDITION 2003

GAME BOY ADVANCE

Realising that the Game Boy Advance was never going to be able to create an accurate version of *Deadly Alliance*, Midway split it across two games, with Tournament Edition being a US exclusive. It effectively featured the other half of the character roster that was absent from the original GBA *Deadly Alliance* game, as well as new story enhancements that added Sareena, Sektor and Noob Saibot to the core story. Only Scorpion, Shang Tsung and Quan Chi appeared in both handheld ports. The GBA's button set-up still compromised the gameplay somewhat and each character only had two fighting styles, but it was a marked improvement on *Mortal Kombat Advance*.

MORTAL KOMBAT DECEPTION 2004

VARIOUS

Deception continued to build on the successful mechanics of *Deadly Alliance*, whilst also adding fresh new ideas. There were now traps that could instantly kill characters if they were knocked into them, two new minigames appeared, one a variation of chess, the other a puzzle game that played like Capcom's *Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo*, and characters now had two Fatality moves, as well as a brand new suicide move. Konquest mode remained, but now focused on a single character, Shujinko. The Krypt also returned. Nine new characters were introduced, creating a playable roster of 26 total brawlers.



MORTAL KOMBAT: SHAOLIN MONKS 2005

PS2, XBOX

Overseen by series co-creator Ed Boon, *Shaolin Monks* is easily the most successful spin-off in the *Mortal Kombat* series, selling over 1 million units. It's effectively a slick cross between a scrolling fighter and an adventure game, with the occasional bit of platforming thrown in for good measure. Designed for co-op play, players guided Liu Kang and Kung Lao through a surprisingly good story that incorporated all the usual *Mortal Kombat* mythology and tropes. The new multi-directional combat engine enabled the player to effortlessly see off large numbers of attackers, while experience points gained from kills powered up special moves in a similar way to *Mythologies*. New to the series were 'Multalities' which enabled the player to perform Fatalities on a large number of enemies at once.





MORTAL KOMBAT ARMAGEDDON 2006

VARIOUS

The character roster of *Armageddon* was absolutely staggering, with 62 available characters (or 63, if you had the Wii version of the game that included Khameleon). Despite the large number of available characters, only two, Taven and Daegon, were brand new to the series. In addition to the large roster, players could also create their own customisable characters, as well as customisable Fatalities. Konquest Mode returned and utilised numerous mechanics from Shaolin Monks, while a *Mario Kart*-styled racer called Motor Kombat was also included. The only downgrade is that most characters only had access to two fighting styles.





MORTAL KOMBAT MEDIA

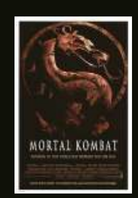
Midway's franchise moved to many other mediums



MORTAL KOMBAT: THE ALBUM

1994

Created by The Immortals, this techno-fuelled soundtrack featured signature tracks for each of the playable characters, as well as Goro.



MORTAL KOMBAT

1995

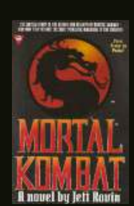
A surprisingly good film by Paul W.S. Anderson, which is clearly influenced by Bruce Lee's *Enter The Dragon*. It features a laughable CGI Goro.



MORTAL KOMBAT KARD GAME

1995

A decent little card game that was based on *Mortal Kombat 1* and *II* and features cards based on special moves and Fatalities.



MORTAL KOMBAT: A NOVEL

1995

This was based on the movie and is notable for featuring many non-canon characters that don't appear anywhere else.



MORTAL KOMBAT VS DC UNIVERSE 2008

VARIOUS

This entertaining crossover turned out to be the last product that Midway Games made before it filed for bankruptcy. It's an excellent swansong for the company to go out on, even if it did have to tone down some aspects of the popular series to appease Warner Bros. Eager to secure a teen rating for the game, Warner Bros insisted that the trademarked gory Fatalities of the series were softened. Despite this, the Fatalities of The Joker, Deathstroke and Kitana were still censored in the US release of the game.

The actual character roster reads like a greatest hits of both franchises, with the likes of Liu Kang, Scorpion, Sub-Zero and Raiden representing *Mortal Kombat*, while Batman, The Joker, Superman and Wonder Woman battle on behalf of DC. The available story mode played out from the viewpoints of both universes and gave every character a chance to shine. It was extremely well written and created the template for future games based on both franchises. The actual story was created by comic writers Justin Gray and Jimmy Palmiotti, which goes someway to explaining its quality.

New mechanics introduced included 'Rage Mode', which allowed characters to break an opponent's guard, increased attack damage and made the character resistant to stun effects, and 'Klose Kombat', where the characters locked together for some close-quarter fighting. The Kollector's Edition of the game was notable for a 16-page comic that featured illustrations by *Mortal Kombat* co-creator, John Tobias.

"THE FATALITIES OF THE JOKER, DEATHSTROKE AND KITANA WERE CENSORED IN THE US RELEASE OF THE GAME"

MORTAL KOMBAT 2011

VARIOUS

Mortal Kombat was the first game from Ed Boon's newly formed NetherRealm Studios and is effectively a reboot of the franchise. Created with the aim to be considered as a competitive fighter, it featured far more strategy than earlier games thanks to the addition of the 'Super Meter', which could be charged to three distinct levels of power. The first level created an enhanced version of an existing special attack, while the second let players break combos. The final level allowed players to pull off a devastating 'X-Ray Move' move which caused massive damage and revealed an X-Ray of characters' bones and organs being ruptured or shattered. Other notable inclusions were a brand new 'Challenge Tower', tag-team fighting and a solid online mode which introduced a 'King Of The Hill' variant for up to eight players. While it only added one new character, Skarlet, it did introduce guest characters in the form of Kratos and Freddy Krueger.



MORTAL KOMBAT X 2015

VARIOUS

The most recent *Mortal Kombat* game is generally considered to be the best in the series. It ramps up the over-the-top X-Ray Moves and introduces nine new characters, including Cassie Cage, D'Vorah, Kotal Kahn and Jacqui Briggs. Downloadable guest characters were also available in the form of Leatherface, Jason Voorhees, Predator and the Xenomorph Alien. As with NetherRealm's earlier fighter, *Injustice: Gods Among Us*, characters could interact with certain parts of each stage, allowing them to avoid or massively damage their opponent. New finishing moves were also introduced, 'Quitalities', which punished players who dropped out of online games, and 'Faction Kills', which were specific to the five factions that players could join.







MORTAL KOMBAT: ANNIHILATION 1997

1994-2015

Midway released a large number of different comics. Several were published by Midway, while later ones were licensed to Malibu Comics and DC Comics.



MORTAL KOMBAT: DEFENDERS OF THE REALM

1996

This 13-episode series was created by Threshold Entertainment and Film Roman, and was set between *Mortal Kombat 1* and *3*.



MORTAL KOMBAT: ANNIHILATION

1997

This awful sequel makes Anderson's original movie look like a masterpiece and is loosely based on *Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3*.



MORTAL KOMBAT: CONQUEST

1998

This 22-episode live action series didn't prove popular enough to secure a second season and as a result ended on an annoying cliffhanger.



MORTAL KOMBAT: LEGACY

2011

This live-action web series was set before the original game and revolved around several characters. A third series is yet to be released.



MORTAL KOMBAT: SONGS INSPIRED BY THE WARRIORS

2011

Released to tie in with the new *Mortal Kombat* reboot, it once again featured electronic and dance-based tunes for key characters.



BEHIND THE SCENES

FINAL FANTASY XII

Of all the mainline games released under the Final Fantasy banner, there are none that have been as critically overlooked as this. Join games™ as we explore how Final Fantasy XII became a modern classic of the RPG genre



Released: 2006
Format: PS2
Publisher: Square Enix
Key Staff: Hiroshi Minagawa (director), Hiroyuki Ito (director), Akitoshi Kawazu (producer), Takashi Katano (Lead programmer), Hiroaki Kato, (project manager)

FINAL FANTASY IS A FRANCHISE THAT HAS NEVER BEEN COMFORTABLE SETTLING. Be it on an idea, on a theme, or even on a set of characters or a world. It's a series that delights in adapting and evolving to mirror the current state of the wider industry. It is at its strongest when it is resetting the bar, challenging the constructs of RPG design, many of which it helped establish, in ways we never imagined were possible.

But *Final Fantasy XII* would prove to be one of Square Enix's biggest challenges, and perhaps the series' most significant overhaul since it fully embraced 3D graphics for *Final Fantasy VII*. It set the stage for everything Square would attempt with the series in the decade to follow; introducing a bigger world and more nuanced characters, an action-oriented battle system and aggressively player-driven RPG systems.

It was a testament to everything the studio was capable of at the time, the reason it – and it alone – seemed to single-handedly control the direction and scope of an entire genre. That, as history has taught us, is a challenge that the development team relished, even if it did come at a great cost. "The very nature of the *Final Fantasy* series is that we try new approaches and that we try new things each time," says Hiroaki Kato, project manager on *Final Fantasy XII*, now serving as producer on *The Zodiac Age* remaster bound for PlayStation 4 in July 2017. "It's a series that has always been about challenging yourself to try a new direction."

Final Fantasy XII entered development in December 2000, and an almost six-year cycle would follow. It was, at the time, largely considered to be one of the longest bouts of active game development in the industry – it even earned itself a place in the *Guinness World Records* book because of it. And while internal shake-ups were a contributing factor to the extended development cycle, the real reason, we're told, is because



■ *Final Fantasy XII* is set in the world of Ivalice, conceived by original game director Yasumi Matsuno. Ivalice is also home to the stories of *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Vagrant Story*, though these is no clear link between these titles.

of an unwavering vision and ambition from the team to push the PlayStation 2 hardware to its very limits.

"I remember when we first started on development, back in the earliest stages," says Takashi Katano, lead programmer on *Final Fantasy XII* and now serving as game director on *The Zodiac Age*. "When I first saw the proposal document of what the team wanted to do with the game I just went, 'oh wow, this is for the PS2? This is a *very* complicated game we are going for.

"You know, I worked on *Final Fantasy X* as well. I was the lead programmer for both *X* and for *XII*, and I remember thinking that there were so many more complicated systems we needed to do for the programming on this one," he continues, laughing. "I was a bit overwhelmed at the start by what they wanted me to do."

I WAS A BIT OVERWHELMED AT THE START BY WHAT THEY WANTED ME TO DO

This wasn't just going to be *Final Fantasy*'s swansong on the PlayStation 2, but an opportunity for Square to use its immeasurable knowledge of the system to create something unprecedented. If 2001's *X* could be seen as a faithful update of the *Final Fantasy* formula for a new generation – an extension of what had been achieved on *VII*, *VIII* and *IX* on the PSone – then *XII* would be the grand reimagining.

This was all set into motion by *Final Fantasy Tactics* director Yasumi Matsuno and *Final Fantasy IX* director Hiroyuki Ito. From the beginning the game was given a clear path, centred around an evolved battle system and changes to the way in which enemy encounters functioned. These two elements remained a consistent focus. "The two main things we really wanted to do with *XII* were, first of all, have the seamless battles," recalls Kato, noting that having encounters transition from overworld to combat without the 'break screen' in the middle was a huge desire for the team. "And then the other was in introducing the Gambit system, our simulated AI system for fighting. They were the two main prongs of our evolution."

■ *Final Fantasy XII* is still a technical marvel to this day, a true testament to Square Enix's immeasurable skill at creating game worlds and engineering sublime mechanical design.



This is surprising, given the internal shake-ups that occurred midway through production. Game director Matsuno was forced to leave the project, citing health concerns, and this led to personnel changes across the project. Ito was joined by Hiroshi Minagawa to partner on directorial duties, while Akitoshi Kawazu became executive producer. It's still unclear as to what impact this had on the direction of the story and world of *XII*. While many of the developers **games™** has spoken with over the years have been eager to assure us that Matsuno's vision was left intact – completed in an impressive fashion by the restructured team to the best of its ability – there's always been a hint that something could have been different. *XII* was set in the world of Ivalice, the very same locale as Matsuno's *Final Fantasy Tactics*, although the link was never made clear in the final release – a shame to this very day. Katano and Kato wouldn't be drawn on the matter.

Still, it's better to appreciate what we did receive rather than that which we did not. The team's desire to move away from random encounters informed how much of the game functioned. Making enemies physical objects in the world that the player could interact with or avoid entirely had a sweeping impact on the basic framework of *Final Fantasy*; the transition between battles and exploration had to be seamless, party management needed to be more intuitive and combat had to shift away from turn-based simulation in favour of action that reflected the new-found pace of play.

All of this came to form the Active Dimension Battle system, a way of working combat into Square's classically sprawling world and claustrophobic dungeon designs. The Gambit System was a way of peeling back the difficulty of the new action-oriented system while still keeping the player engaged; it was, as Katano tells us, a testament to the skill of battle system





Across the six main playable characters, *Final Fantasy XII* is widely regarded to have some of the best heroes in the franchise's long history.

REDEFINING FINAL FANTASY

A DECADE LATER, THESE ARE STILL THE DEFINING ACHIEVEMENTS OF XII





[1] ACTIVE BATTLE

If you forget about MMORPG *Final Fantasy XI* for a second, *XII* would be the first mainline game to ditch random encounters. The results of this were combat unfolding in real-time, with the player able to see enemies in the overworld and choose to fight or avoid them entirely.

[2] CAMERA CONTROL

Unlike previous games in the series, *Final Fantasy XII* gave the player the opportunity to control the camera with the analogue stick. The transition to a full third-person perspective made the world feel far more vibrant and *real* than any created by Square before it.





[3] CHANGE CHARACTERS

While the principle focus of the story was on Vann and Penelo, you were able to switch to any characters in your party (so long as you were outside of a city, where control was locked to Vann). This meant you could take control of any member in combat should your Gambit selections begin to fail.

[4] GAMBIT SYSTEM

The Gambit system essentially pushed *Final Fantasy* into the realms of real-time action with a clever blend of turn-based tactics behind it. The system worked by letting you program each of the characters in your party to perform certain commands and actions in battle, reactive to what the enemies are doing at any given moment.





[5] LICENSE BOARD

The License Board, while ultimately expanded in future additions of the game, was an interesting way of expanding characters and managing their potential growth throughout the game. It was a well-executed evolution of *FFX*'s Sphere Grid system that brought more autonomy and definition to the characters.

[6] TECHNICAL PERFECTION

It may have been released on the PS2, but *Final Fantasy XII* was a technical marvel when it released. While many were making the leap to the PS3 blindly, those willing to hold off on a jump to the next generation were rewarded with a visually stunning release that put many of the launch window titles to shame.

■ The Gambit system essentially allows players to create automated systems for combat, letting the rest of the party work instinctively to shifting parameters of battles.



WHAT THEY SAID…

Beautiful, engrossing and impeccably polished, FFXII is also a work of progressive genius that hauls its staid genre up by the bootstraps and takes its place alongside the WOWs and Oblivions of this world

Edge, 2006

designer Hiroyuki Ito – and the programming work undertaken by Takashi Isowaki and Katano himself – that this was able to function so successfully.

The Gambit system essentially allowed the player to program each of the characters in their party to perform certain commands and actions in battle. It's a system that seems simple on the surface but actually allowed for an impressive amount of depth, even affording the opportunity to program responses to specific conditions and outcomes. It was, frankly, ahead of its time. Given that you could control only one character in combat, the rest of your party would move and act autonomously, making it look to any onlookers as if a huge battle was raging around you – but to the player, it was merely a clever implementation of simple, pre-planned parameters: a target, an action and a priority execution for each hero.

"The way in which the Gambit system works – and where the enjoyment from that system is drawn from – is that it allows you to adapt your Gambit selection and the build you have created to fit each situation," considers Katano. "Taking it into a battle for the first time and seeing if it works or not… when you get it right it feels great."

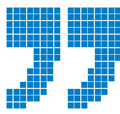
The difficulty, he tells us, was getting the balance right. *Final Fantasy XII* was a huge game, and ensuring that players would be constantly challenged was a huge point of conflict for the team. "The worst possible balance for that system is if you can find one ultimate combination and use it for every single battle," Katano tells us. "We really had to try and avoid that. We had to make sure that all of the enemies, the bosses – and the bounties and mob hunts – were varied enough, that pushed you to try different combinations." It's also worth remembering that this balance would eventually be revisited, first in 2007, for the release of *Final Fantasy XII: The International Zodiac Job System* edition of the game, and then a decade later, when the core team returned for *The Zodiac Age* remaster for PS4.

WHAT WE TRIED TO DO WITH XII WAS TO REALLY EXPLOIT THE POWER OF THE PS2 HARDWARE AND REALLY PUSH IT TO ITS LIMITS

Given how tribal *Final Fantasy* fans can be, notoriously so, we wondered whether a fear of fan backlash could have played on the studio's mind throughout the game's development. As every year passed expectations only continued to grow. Fans' desperation for another 'classic' experience on par with *VII* and *VIII* was becoming more broadly recognised – thanks in large part to the increasing reach of the internet and popularity of gaming forums. Kato is quick to assure us that this didn't play on the minds of the team, they were too focused on the task at hand to worry

WHAT THEY SAID…

This is simply one of the best role-playing games to have hit PS2, full of glorious battles and stunning design… ignore it at your peril, or if you like people thinking you're a moron



Games Master, 2007





about anything else. "We were really far more focused on just making sure that the system was as good as it could be and that we were achieving everything that we wanted to do with it.

"We were taking on the challenge of doing something new – and we felt we had to do that – so it was just about making a game that could be played and enjoyed. About getting those systems refined and working as it should do before we even started thinking about whether some people would like it and whether some people wouldn't."

Given all of the additions and changes to the core play of *Final Fantasy*, you'd be right in wondering whether the studio ever stepped back and wondered whether it was going too far. Despite the development period, not everything on the team's wish list made the cut. The idea of co-operative play was considered but ultimately abandoned – a limitation of the PlayStation 2 hardware being the principle reason. Another – one that spent far too long in gestation – was the idea of recruiting NPC characters to join you on mob hunts, although this was, again, considered too much for the hardware to deal with. But there were also decisions made in service of the player, in an effort to ensure the game was as playable and enjoyable as possible from day one.

"There was actually a discussion about including a job system, or at least a variation of it, in *XII* right from the start," says Kato, discussing the system that would later be introduced in the reworked 2007 release. "But what we decided there, from a design perspective, because we already had the Gambit system, was if we added that and a complete job system it might be a bit too much for the player to deal with – that it may have been too many new systems for them to understand."

IT MAY HAVE BEEN TOO MANY NEW SYSTEMS FOR THEM TO UNDERSTAND

"So we held back, deciding to have just that single licence board," he says, adding, "we thought that was probably an easier way for people to understand the game." He isn't wrong, of course, as leaping into *XII* for the first time can be a dizzying experience, especially today, where many of the systems it introduced have been refined and streamlined by other games released since. Still, making these kinds of decisions isn't an easy task, Katano tells us, and there wasn't always a path for making them.

"There isn't one clear process for doing this," he says, discussing the difficulties in making cuts or streamlining systems. "It's more of a feeling. When we are creating the game we play it a lot, assessing it as we continue to develop it. If we come across something that seems a little complicated for the player we would talk to [Hiroyuki Ito] and sometimes he would say, 'yeah you're right, this is a little bit over the top,' but other times he would say, 'no, this is what I'm trying to do with this system,' and he will convince us that it really was supposed to be like that. There is no one way of doing it, but it very much is done by feeling it out on a case-by-case basis."

All of this work was, of course, undertaken with a cloud looming over it. There's a reason that *XII* tends to be the *Final Fantasy* game that struggles to get attention, and it has nothing to do with quality. Thanks to the extended development cycle, *XII* launched just ahead of the NA release *Final Fantasy XI* – the first online-only game in the franchise and the cause for much

THE CHARACTERS ENDURE

How Final Fantasy is able to stand the test of time

IF ANYTHING CAN be said about *Final Fantasy* games, it's that they seem to effortlessly escape the horrors of time. While the graphics may age, the systems and mechanics still feel fresh and fun, the story still relevant. Kato believes this is down to the series' willingness to evolve and the strong focus on character development through the earliest stages of planning.

"I think people will be able to feel some commonality with these characters when they play it today, definitely. I think one of the big reasons for that is that the main theme for the game – through the story and the characters – is a very universal one, the difference between freedom and responsibility; what these are and how people related to them. Because of that, and that's the core of it, whatever time you're at and whenever you play it, these things will always be a part of the human experience. That's why I think *FFXII* is still relevant now.

"That also combines with the way that we do new things, build new systems and try new challenges. I think the composite of that when it all comes together is really why people have such great expectations of *Final Fantasy* and why these are met every single time."



> A GAMING EVOLUTION

FF XII > International Zodiac Job System > The Zodiac Age



Released in 2007, this updated version of *FFXII* included 12 license boards and reassessed encounter balance.



This HD remaster of the Japanese-only International Zodiac Job System includes numerous performance updates.



(unwarranted, as it should happen) excitement between fans – and, of course, the emergence of a new console known as the PlayStation 3.

The game was largely overshadowed by the excitement surrounding the PS3 launch, Sony's answer to the hugely popular Xbox 360. At this point, *XII* looked like a technical marvel, but was struggling to hold attention when held up against the dizzying graphical presentation of titles such as *Heavenly Sword*, *Resistance* and *MotorStorm*. But moving *XII* to the PS3 wasn't an option for the team, they were simply too far forward in development – the console wasn't even a known consideration when they had begun work on the project.

"What we tried to do with *XII* was to really exploit the power of the PS2 hardware and really push it to its limits. Naturally, it was always going to be the timing that it was because of where we were in the development cycle," says Kato, although Katano is quick to note that a game such as *XII* simply wouldn't have been able to exist at the start of either console cycles. "By that stage we had worked out what the PS2 could do, so we planned around that… you couldn't do it at the beginning of the cycle. In that respect, I think [the release] was the right timing." It was only possible because of the deep knowledge that the studio had of the system, built up over time and experimentation.

It's only now, through the prism of the *Zodiac Age* remaster that the team is really able to appreciate what the technical limitations of the PS2 really were. "When we first started working on the project, the PlayStation 4 remaster, we all sat down and everybody on the team played the original game," recalls Katano. "A number of the things that came up – the response and the feedback from the team after playing the game – were that the loading times were way too long, and as the lead programmer on the original game that was a very difficult thing for me to hear," he says, sharing a laugh with Kato. "And certainly the distance between two save crystals was very long; if you saved and you went off and then you died, you would lose a lot of time in the game. So we thought, if you played this as a modern game, people wouldn't really be as accepting or as forgiving of this now, so we had to change that. Those are the kinds of things that we picked up on."

The Zodiac Age, much like the original release of *XII*, feels fresh and fun in a way that no other *Final Fantasy* game has. For all intents and purposes, this is an HD remaster of *The International Zodiac Job System* version of the game, touting a better HUD, faster combat, new license boards and a further refined game balance. One of the biggest problems with the original release of *XII* – an oversight at the time – was that every character essentially becomes an overpowered behemoth by the end of the game, with the license board – an array of regimented abilities and stat boosts you can unlock – diminishing the differences between each of the characters over time so they all end up feeling more or less the same. The addition and expansion of the job system essentially allows for party diversification, and far more autonomy; in many respects, *XII* is the best *Final Fantasy* has ever handled the balance between action and tactical play, and this only serves to highlight and enhance that fact. This was the game to set *Final Fantasy* on a new path and thanks to that it also has a clearer vision than some of the games that followed

"Looking back to *XII*, the fact that we could even do a remaster of it all is what I'm so proud of," says Kato, beaming. "Looking back on the game, we can see that we got it to a really high level the first time around. To see all of the effort that the development staff put into it, and how that made the final product what it was, it's just really great. I'm really proud to see that everybody's effort paid off."



With a development cycle of close to six years, *Final Fantasy XII* was once widely considered to have one of the longest active development periods in the videogame industry.

Final Fantasy XII launched in 2006, shortly before the launch of the PS3. It's for that reason that this game is largely overlooked by the masses, but no less loved by the core.





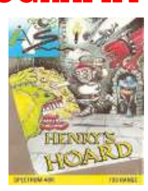


RETRO INTERVIEW

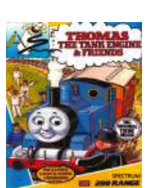
ROGER HULLEY

He's been in charge of West Yorkshire-based Alternative Software for over 30 years, from humble budget origins to current gen sports simulations. **games™** talks to the industry veteran about the ups and downs of running the enduring software house

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Henry's Hoard
[1985] Publisher



Thomas The Tank Engine And Friends
[1991] Publisher



Don Bradman Cricket 14
[2014] Publisher

BEFORE ALTERNATIVE WAS formed, you worked in the music industry?

Yes. I got heavily into music while at Manchester University, DJ'd regularly and used to write rock fanzines. I was studying biological sciences and realised where it was going to lead wouldn't be as fun as the music industry at the time! I was, and still am, very passionate about music. I started working for EMI, and then eventually moved into the HMV side [EMI owned HMV at this point]. Thinking like a student, being able to have this huge record collection that I could basically take home anything of a night and listen to it, that was more motivation to me than the money.

When did you first come into contact with the videogame industry?

This was in the late Seventies. I'd been poached from HMV by a chain of record shops in the north called Foxes, and was appointed their general manager. At that time, record shops only sold records and related merchandise, and I thought we ought to be looking at other things too. So I started the very first video library in Yorkshire that was within a record shop, also selling CDs before they were commonplace. Then I thought, what's next? I'd heard of the Atari VCS and Colecovision, so decided we should stock games for those as well. Then disc and tape games began in the early Eighties, and I just got the feeling this was quite good fun, and very similar to the record industry. So I packed in the day job and started working in computer games.

You began with a distribution company, but were soon bitten by the publishing bug – how did that start?

> **I'D NOTED THAT MASTERTRONIC HAD HAD A BIG HIT WITH NINJA AND CODEMASTERS WITH BMX SIMULATOR, SO I THOUGHT WHY NOT COMBINE THE TWO!**

One day, a chap called Martyn Brown and his partner, Mick Robinson, came to see me. They'd done a game called *Henry's Hoard* on the ZX Spectrum and it wasn't going very well. So I offered to buy their stock, masters and so on, and the name they'd used: Alternative.

***Henry's Hoard* was advertised along with another Spectrum game, *Pheenix*.**

Yes, they were our first wave of releases at Xmas 1985. Our distribution company was called R&R and Alternative became a sister company. I employed David Palmer to handle the print side of it all and we had a contribution from the design council, which enabled us to repackage all the games. One of our biggest early hits was *Howzat!* which went into the top 30 of Spectrum games, during the winter as well, probably because the England team were doing so well in Australia at the time.

So initially at least, Alternative bought games that had been previously released?

They were a good result, so I went out and acquired more back catalogue. I went for games that I particularly liked, such as *Skool Daze* and *Trap Door*. We'd buy out companies, smaller operations to start, but towards the end I was buying a lot of bigger back catalogues such as Activision, Durell and Incentive. Not necessarily all their games, just the ones we thought were the best.

And like many software houses, you started your own development studio.
We were getting programmers sending us games, so we had a studio in Sheffield called Bizarre Developments. We used them to do our own games, of which one of the first was *BMX Ninja*. I'd noted that Mastertronic had had a big hit with *Ninja* and Codemasters with *BMX Simulator*, so I thought why not combine the two! It got banned by WH Smith because its artist had put a poster in the background that had a topless woman on it, in tiny little dots. I never even knew it was there until someone pointed it out.

From 1987 onwards Alternative expanded each year and began licensing product too.
It was our plan. Mirrorsoft was the only publisher really doing children's games and they had a Mr. Men range that was quite expensive – £9.99 per game, which I thought was a lot for a parent to invest in a computer game for a young child. We reasoned there was a market for children's games at a much lower price point.

What ended up being your first original licence with Alternative?
I approached Britt Allcroft about creating a *Thomas The Tank Engine* game, but her company turned it down – they thought all computer games were about violence and shooting things. I explained that wasn't going to be our approach, obviously, and we just wanted to create a world where the child could just visit places and interact with other characters. But they wouldn't go for it, so I approached the BBC who at the time controlled *Postman Pat*. They were much more receptive, and after the success of that game, we went back to Britt Allcroft and, after seeing what we'd done with *Postman Pat*, they were delighted, and said yes. Then followed *Sooty And Sweep*, *Count Duckula*, *Fireman Sam* and lots more. The template was the same in most of the games; a child could just wander around the world, having fun and not having to play the game by strict rules.

The 8-bit budget industry was notoriously competitive thanks to the likes of Mastertronic and Codemasters. How did Alternative prosper in this time?
It *was* tough, but fun. We were buying in and developing our own games, and we bought a duplication plant as obviously the physical cost was quite high in comparison to what we were selling the games at. I also think we had a pretty good range out there as well, and were determined to be in control from the very creation of the product through to getting it on the shelves.

Did you ever dabble with full-price releases?
We had a sub-label called Summit, which was named after a card game my father devised. Its first release was a utility called *Art Master*, which had a higher price point, and it sold well, but not enough in terms of volume. So we brought it down to £2.99 as we still needed that extra margin. A lot of other stuff with 'older' appeal, such as Theatre Europe and Mini Office, was priced at that level. But then we tried again with another label called Again Again.

And what ended up being the first game on that label?
Actually I wanted to get the licence for a game based on *The Addams Family*. This was before the movie came out, and I tried to do a deal with the rights holder, who I think was an ex-wife of Charles Addams. But that proved difficult to tie down, so I decided to get *The Munsters* instead. It wasn't as popular a show, but within the genre it did very well.

Despite the Munsters, Alternative had a reputation for British character licensing.
We generally stuck to that because our strength was in the ZX Spectrum; although we published across many formats, that was the most important.

A period many software houses struggled with was the early Nineties and the end of the 8-bit era. How did this affect Alternative?
The situation came to a head pretty much overnight when WH Smith decided they weren't going to stock 8-bit software any more, and our biggest customer effectively disappeared. We were already doing 16-bit games, but to be honest we didn't have enough coming through. The packaging was more expensive, development harder. It was a difficult time.

THE SITUATION CAME TO A HEAD PRETTY MUCH OVERNIGHT WHEN WH SMITH DECIDED THEY WEREN'T GOING TO STOCK 8-BIT SOFTWARE ANY MORE

Going back to the 8-bit era briefly, Alternative never advertised much, presumably due to the low profit margin of budget games. Do you think this adversely affected review scores in magazines?
We didn't have the resources for many adverts, and there was always a feeling in the software industry at the time that if a reviewer was going to give a bad review of a game, it would likely be the smaller publishers because the advertising spend wasn't there. But whether that was true or not was another matter…

By the mid-Nineties, the PlayStation was king, but development costly.
For that reason we didn't publish many console games. You had to spend lots of money on development and if the game didn't sell it was bye-bye for a small company like ours. We kept our overheads low and stayed in the home computer sector.

And in doing so, moved away from games?
We did a lot of paint and create products, print studio software, which was popular at the time. Using the licenses such as Thomas The Tank Engine, we created educational software and virtual colouring books. We became very good at expanding the IPs into other areas, got an investor on board and did a few deals with printer manufacturers. We still did the odd game such as *The Quivering*.

When was the hardest time for Alternative?
In September 1997 we were still in Pontefract, and were the victim of a very large fire. Our offices, duplication plant, papers, stock, all gone. It was started from the building next door who'd been broken into and had an arson attack. It took out a wall and for six months – over winter – we worked in a building with a tarpaulin. It was obviously a tough time, so I had to think up ideas to make money quickly. The label Premier Sports was created, and we did interactive programs for lots of football clubs such as Manchester United and Glasgow Rangers.

You returned to games in 2003 with console development, and again you focused on some sports titles.
I've always been a big rugby league fan and was vice chairman of Castleford Tigers for ten years. In association with Tru Blu Entertainment we released *Rugby League* on the PlayStation 2 and Xbox. Since then we've released a sequel, as well as *Jonah Lomu Rugby Challenge* and our latest series, *Don Bradman Cricket*. The latest release, *Don Bradman Cricket 17*, is doing really well.

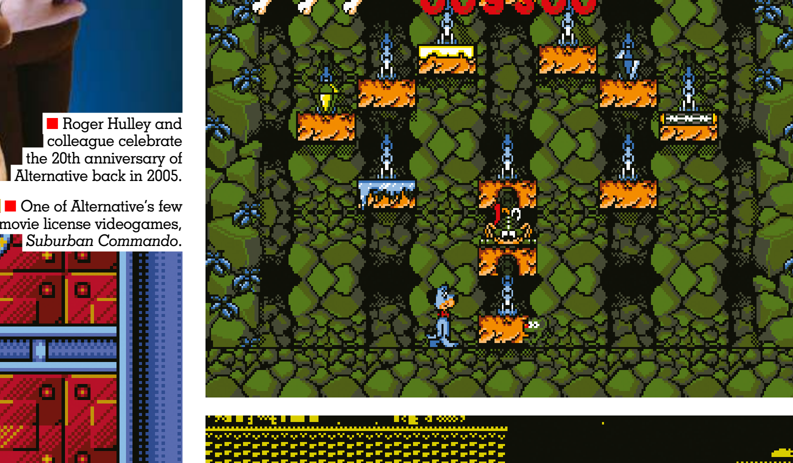
What have been your favourite or most exciting periods of Alternative's life?
Starting out would have been the most exciting, launching our first games and seeing them climb the charts, that was a huge buzz. In those days it was primarily a home computer market, not like the dominance of platform holders as it is today. As such, there were a lot of indie developers, many just one-man-bands. It's good to see indie developers are back on the rise, as this is often where new and exciting IP comes from.

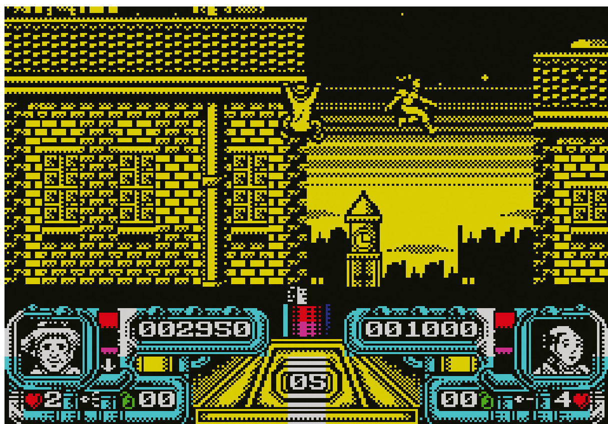
What do you think has been the key behind Alternative's longevity?
I'd be a liar if I admitted to some powerful understanding of the videogame industry. As usual, the truth is a little more boring. We've kept our overheads tight, never over-expanded and never had an over-inflated opinion of ourselves. Specialising in products that are popular, even if short-term, also helped.

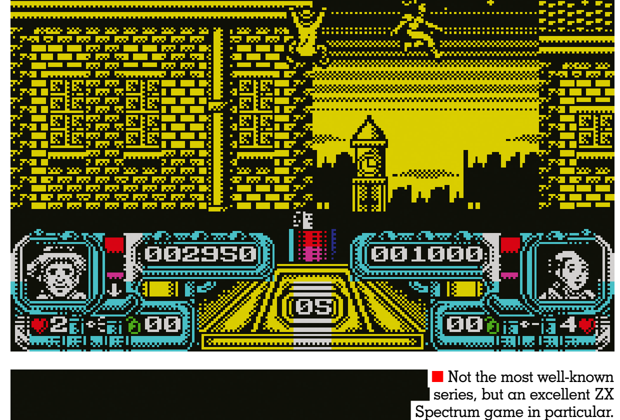


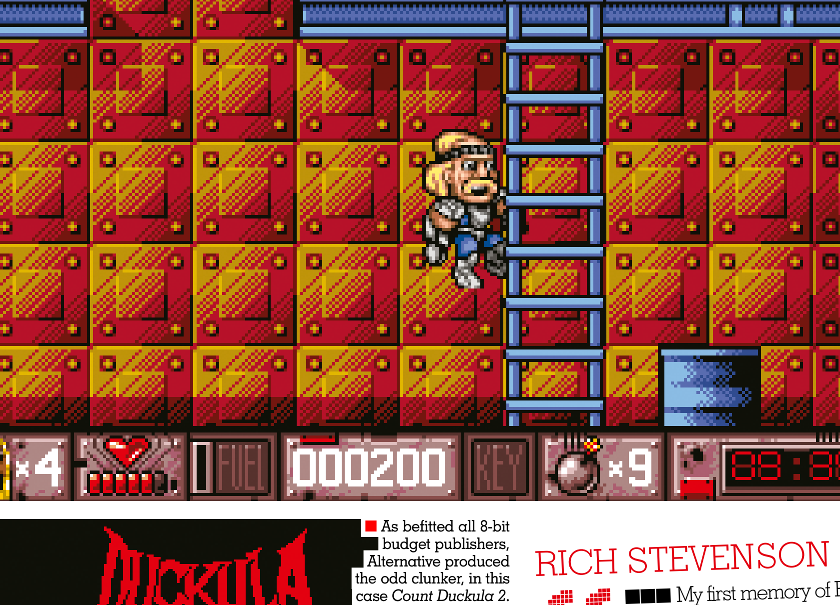
Roger Hulley and colleague celebrate the 20th anniversary of Alternative back in 2005.



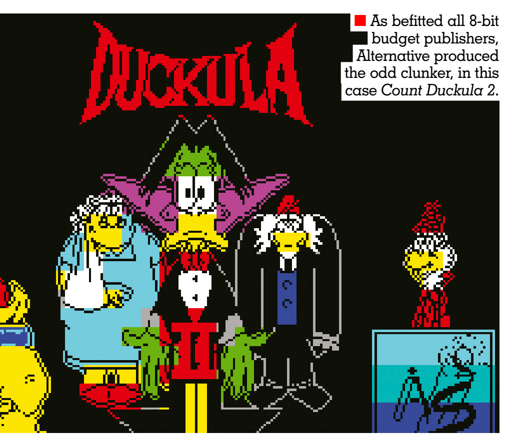








One of Alternative's few movie license videogames, *Suburban Commando*.



As befitted all 8-bit budget publishers, Alternative produced the odd clunker, in this case *Count Duckula 2*.

RICH STEVENSON

"My first memory of Roger was meeting him at his house where he agreed to take a punt at distributing some of my home-produced games. He was always willing to give independent labels a go and years later, as the Alternative empire grew, I ended up working for him as a developer. Roger was always positive about the products he was working with and his enthusiasm always rubbed off on those who worked around him. His only fault: some of his game ideas really should have stayed as ideas!"



Not the most well-known series, but an excellent ZX Spectrum game in particular.

Thief: The Dark Project is the developer's most successful game, shifting over half a million units before the end of 2000 and Looking Glass Studios' untimely closure.

GAME CHANGERS

THIEF: THE DARK PROJECT

Released: 30 November 1998 **Publisher:** Eidos Interactive **Developer:** Looking Glass Studios **System:** PC

Setting the benchmark for 3D stealth, this classic from Looking Glass Studios is still as striking and ambitious today as it was two decades ago

1998 WAS ONE of the most important years in the history of gaming. For many, it is largely remembered for being the period in which the FPS reinvented itself, shifting radically from the linear frameworks of the run-and-gun shooter to a more considered and mechanically ambitious level that ushered in the likes of *Half-Life*, *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* and (the oft-overlooked) *SiN*. But there was something else out there too, hiding off in the shadows, just out of sight but never out of mind. *Metal Gear Solid* and *Tenchu: Stealth Assassins* may have assembled a template for 3D stealth, but *Thief: A Dark Project* – arriving in the dying embers of the year – set a standard that, arguably, is yet to be bested or since perfected by any other franchise.

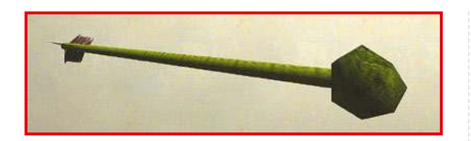
The freedom *Thief* offered was intoxicating. In a year of so much change for the first-person shooter, it was *A Dark Project* that captured the attention of a certain type of player. A game for those that sought challenge, designed for those that had grown exhausted by the mindless slaughter found in the many (*many*) *DOOM* clones of the era, and a respite for those that craved the darkness. And *Thief*, categorised internally as a 'first-person-sneaker', lived and died in that darkness.

Basic moment-to-moment play required a near constant level of monitoring. Awareness isn't a skill that you are ever handed, it is earned through hours of trial and error. Were it to debut today, *Thief*, in granting so little leniency to the player, would likely be considered actively player hostile – back in 1998, this was all a part of its charm.

Every action must be made in moderation for fear of the subsequent reaction. Movement, visibility and noise had to be a considered every step of the way; *Thief*'s management of light, dark and sound is still legendary to this day, a true masterclass in managing player action through the most natural of elements. *Thief* combined complex – and at the

THE ARMOURY

THE BEST ARROWS TO ASSIST WITH STEALTH



MOSS ARROW

★ Used to reduce noise across hard surfaces, the Moss Arrow actually layers the floor with sound absorbing moss… don't ask, we don't understand how it works either. In a game with monsters and demons, you just have to take a few things for granted.



WATER ARROW

★ One of the most useful items in Garrett's arsenal, the Water Arrow is a multi-purpose utility that can serve a number of purposes. The most useful is to extinguish sources of light at a distance, aiding unencumbered movement through the shadows.



NOISEMAKER ARROW

★ The Noisemaker Arrow creates a lot of noise. *A lot*. If you misfire, you'll be in a lot of trouble, but get it right on the other hand and you'll send guards running off in the wrong direction. It's a risk, but one worth taking when you find yourself in a tight spot.

time, groundbreaking – artificial intelligence with deeply engaging simulation systems, the result being emergent scenarios where every enemy encounter would react suitably to your presence. Of course, the goal was for there to be suitable lack thereof. Developer Looking Glass Studio purposely built *Thief* to be an overwhelming challenge for any that dared to step into combat, moving through locations in perfect silence became almost second nature, instinctual. If there were any other ways to progress through the game's sprawling, labyrinth levels we wouldn't want to hear about it.

■ ■ ■ *Thief* was, in the truest sense, one of the purest stealth games ever released, and the limitations of both the hardware and proprietary Dark Engine only helped cultivate that fantasy. The City was a bleak and oppressive locale, its angular architecture only playing into the malevolent atmosphere that clung to the sullen streets. And it was here that we – as no-nonsense Garrett – were pushed to uncover some of the biggest treasures The City concealed in its shadows. Of course, finding them was all part of the challenge (and fun, we suppose).

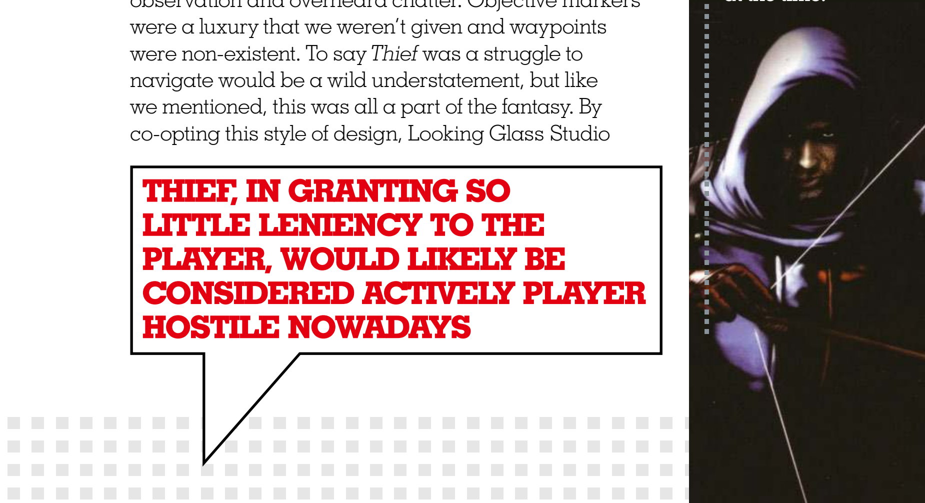
The maps presented to you were vague, at best – hand-scrawled and often outdated, based on observation and overheard chatter. Objective markers were a luxury that we weren't given and waypoints were non-existent. To say *Thief* was a struggle to navigate would be a wild understatement, but like we mentioned, this was all a part of the fantasy. By co-opting this style of design, Looking Glass Studio

THIEF, IN GRANTING SO LITTLE LENIENCY TO THE PLAYER, WOULD LIKELY BE CONSIDERED ACTIVELY PLAYER HOSTILE NOWADAYS

KEY FACTS

■ *Thief: The Dark Project* was written by Ken Levine, his debut title before later going on to direct such classics as *System Shock II*, *BioShock* and *BioShock Infinite*.

■ *Thief*'s proprietary Dark Engine was written during development, as opposed to being a separately budgeted project, only adding to Looking Glass Studios' time and money problems at the time.



essentially ensured that players would embody the role of the master thief. By pushing you to rely on established landmarks to aid in navigation attempts, by forcing you to memorise shortcuts and get 'a feel' for its winding streets, The City became second nature, *home*. It doesn't take long before you transition from being a passive participant in the game, but an active citizen of The City, using your understanding of its people, its streets and its shadows to gain access to its most treasured objects.

Graphically, time hasn't been kind to *Thief*. Its system and sound design, however, is as ingenious today as it was at release. It's here where *Thief* also earns its place in the 'immersive sim' hall of fame alongside *Deus Ex*, *System Shock II* and *Ultima Underworld*. The shadows weren't Garrett's only weapon against The City – his bow could be equipped with an array of modifications to help aid unencumbered movement. Arrows bearing water vials could be used to wash away blood stains – to aid in concealing bodies – or used to extinguish distant torches, casting yet more shadow around you; noisemakers could briefly distract guards, while climbable ropes and arrows capable of rendering hard surfaces silent would only increase your survivability in tight situations. A limited HUD, monitoring your presence in light and exposure to enemies was helpful, but it was truly the audio design that kept the experience alive; it's staggering what the team was able to do here in this respect, tension and relief achieved through the lightest of footsteps and total, deafening silence.

Thief has its problems, but the mastery of its design ensures that it lives on as a classic. It set the benchmark for 3D stealth games, stripping the player of all but the bare essentials. It relied on sense and presence – light and shadow – to make you feel simultaneously empowered and vulnerable, in control and totally lost. But that's the beauty of *Thief*, a wickedly simple idea brought to life with excellent execution.

GAME CHANGERS

8 BEST STEA

THERE HAVE BEEN PLENTY OF GAMES THAT RELY ON SHADOWS OVER SHOTGUNS IN THE YEARS SINCE THIEF'S RELEASE, BUT THESE 8 STUNNING STEALTH GAMES OWE A DEBT TO IT



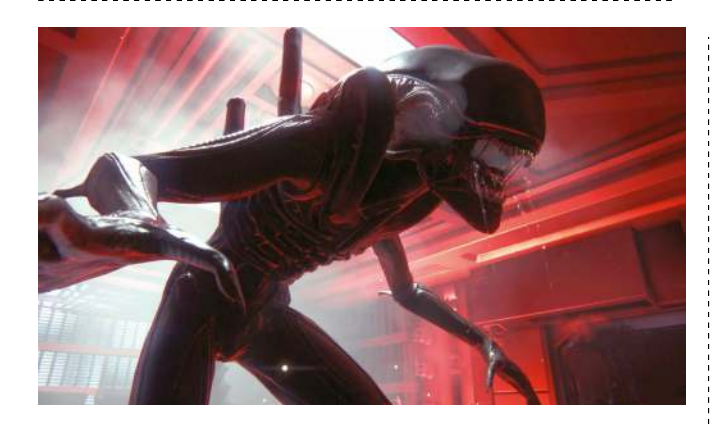
THIEF II: THE METAL AGE

The sequel to *Thief: The Dark Project*, released in 2000, is – like any good sequel should be – superior to its predecessor in almost every way conceivable. That's because Looking Glass Studios simply took its core engine, systems and mechanics and built a better game around them. The story and mission structure is more focused, the level design more ingenious; *Thief II* is a game that every gamer should play at least once in their life.



DEUS EX

Featuring one of the best sandbox structures to ever grace videogames, *Deus Ex* stands tall as one of the very best stealth games ever released. Across its huge, sprawling and interconnected environments, it allowed the player to experiment and play with its wildly adaptive systems, creating a stealth experience that was largely player-driven. The scope of *Deus Ex*'s ambition and execution is still staggering to this day.



ALIEN ISOLATION

In many respects, *Alien Isolation* is one of the most important steps forward for first-person stealth games in close to a decade. Featuring fantastic AI systems, a truly stunning graphical presentation and an intuitive use of sound/light, *Alien Isolation* wasn't just a faithful callback to Ridley Scott's masterpiece, *Alien*, but a truly innovative stealth game that we struggle to see any studio besting any time soon.



SPLINTER CELL: CHAOS THEORY

Splinter Cell wouldn't exist as we know it today without *Thief*. It inherited its focus on light, shadow and sound to function at a basic level and took it to an all new extreme (and we do mean *extreme*). With the powerful Xbox technology behind it, *Chaos Theory* redefined stealth mechanics, sound design and level design for a new generation of stealth games.

LTH GAMES



DISHONORED 2

■ Given Arkane's love and appreciation of immersive sim genre games, it's no surprise to see its *Dishonored* franchise so effortlessly carrying the mantle of the *Thief* franchise long after Eidos Montreal failed to deliver. *Dishonored 2* may lean more heavily towards intertwining systems than light and sound, but it's still the most faithful homage to *Thief*'s starring ideals and concepts available today.



MARK OF THE NINJA

■ Accurately communicating visibility has always been something of a struggle for stealth games, particularly those in 3D, but *Mark Of The Ninja* has all but solved that problem in two dimensions. One of the finest stealth games of the last generation, *MOTN* features incredibly smart level design and a killer UI that only adds to the excitement and thrills to be found sneaking through the shadows.



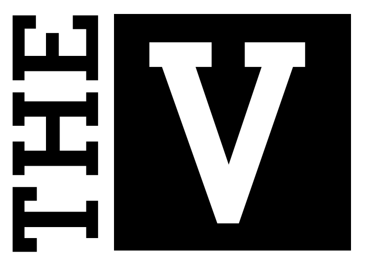
HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY

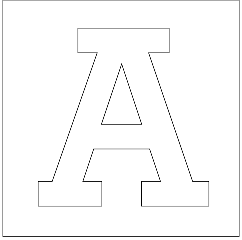
■ The *Hitman* games have always been something of a curiosity, never quite hitting the mark but always offering a degree of enjoyability. That all changed with *Hitman: Blood Money*, impressing with its sublime level layouts and impressively reactive sandbox design – the hallmarks of any good callback to the *Thief* legacy. *Hitman* may focus more on the assassination fantasy, but how you meet your mark is half the journey.

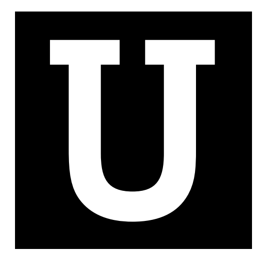


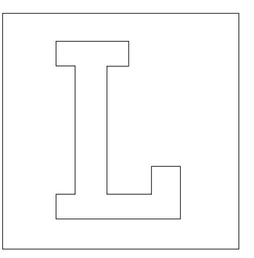
THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK: ESCAPE FROM BUTCHER BAY

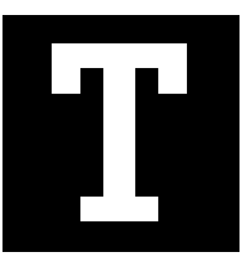
■ Listen, we know that *The Chronicles Of Riddick* has a tendency to veer into brawler territory from time to time, but the underlying stealth mechanics are pretty fantastic. At its time of release in 2009, it featured a stunning lighting system and combined it with excellent level and mission design. This last-gen classic is often overlooked, but it's well worth a stab in the dark.











G413 CARBON MECHANICAL GAMING KEYBOARD

MANUFACTURER: **LOGITECH** PRICE: **£99.99**



WE'RE SIMPLE FOLK on **games™** if you haven't worked that out already, and as such we appreciate game accessories and products that don't overcomplicate matters. As we return to Logitech's latest keyboard range we find another product that seems to share our appreciation for functionality over flash. The G413 Carbon keyboard is a cheaper and in some ways more fully functioning keyboard, well built for everyday use compared to its previously featured cousin the Logitech Pro. Where that was all about offering compact design with in-built customisation and lighting options, this keyboard focuses on comfort and practicality. The number keys return, which some players will appreciate if they like a custom setup. The mechanical build of the keys is practically identical to the Pro, with the same Romer G design beneath the hood.

Or rather where a hood would be, as the G413 actually has a rather exposed look, the keys freestanding without a case to conceal them. At first we thought that might prove a little uncomfortable or awkward, but far from it. While the keys are quite raised to look at without a casing around them, they're actually very nicely placed. And without a shell the G413 should be very easy to keep clean (good news for anyone who likes to snack while they snipe). There's no custom lighting options, just the base red glow, but you can switch out the primary gaming keys for something with heavier indention for easy touch identification. All told, it's a solidly built, fast acting and comfortable piece of kit, well worth looking at for the price.

www.logitech.co.uk





All of the important gaming keys come with replacements in the box that give them a heavier indentation. Perfect for finding them without looking.



There's an excellent brush-metal finish to the body of this keyboard, which is made additionally dramatic by the lack of casing around the keys.



While this USB port means you can plug your mouse in for easy access, you still need to use up a PC port as a second cable needs to be plugged in for it to work.

GAMING CLOTHING



SOMA – PATHOS II T-SHIRT

More great quality t-shirt making from the Gametee crew, this time offering an officially licensed piece of merchandise for SOMA. Each shirt is uniquely acid-washed, making it a one of a kind.
www.gametee.co.uk



STARDEW VALLEY – FARM MADE

We have to say we love it when a small indie game gets some merch and this Stardew Valley shirt embodies the game so nicely. It's a classy and pretty subtle design, but it's also quite cute with its colouring and chicken.
www.fangamer.com



LINK SHIRT

This long-sleeved shirt from Musterbrand is inspired by Link's famous tunic and hat look, as the hood is actually a little pointy to mimic his style. There's some great detailing on this top and it's available in a range of sizes.
www.musterbrand.com

XBOX WIRELESS CONTROLLER- RECON TECH SPECIAL EDITION

SOLD BY: **GAME** PRICE: **£59.99**

THE XBOX ONE controller, already one of the stronger controller designs in the history of gaming, has quietly been going through some evolutions in the last couple of years, with Microsoft adding new features and making small adjustments to its design. While the existence of the Pro Controller might have led to the default gamepad being ignored, the Xbox team has shown a laudable commitment to its everyday intermediary between player and machine.

The latest example of this is the Recon Tech gamepad, which features such welcome additions as rubberised grip on the rear of the pad and a laser-etched rubber grip on the front. It's more than just a pretty design, though, and should hug your hand nicely. Thanks to the new features of the Xbox One S and a downloadable app you can also enjoy longer wireless range, custom button mapping and, as with all new Xbox One controllers, it's compatible with all 3.5mm headphone jacks.

If you're looking for a new controller for your machine and don't want to go crazy spending money on the Pro controller, then this looks like a fine upgrade on the standard pad.
game.co.uk

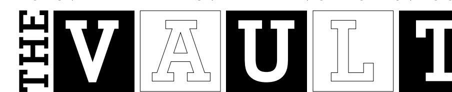
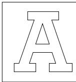


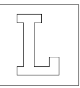
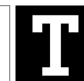
The image on each of these buttons can be customised to your needs and preferences.

ELGATO STREAM DECK

SOLD BY: **GAME** PRICE: **£139.95**

THIS IS A fascinating new piece of kit from Elgato designed to help you increase production value on our gaming streams while also offering a lot of customisation. The 15 keys on the display are LCD screens so they can display different icons and images as you require. From simple functions to launching gif overlays on the screen or pop-up captions when you need them, the Stream Deck can turn your live game of *Battlegrounds* into something that feels closer to a properly produced broadcast. There are 210 different actions that can be loaded up to this device and custom icons can be created for different functions if that makes your life easier (or just more interesting). Even something as simple as a button that automatically tweets out a message linking to your stream strikes us as a great move. This isn't a cheap piece of kit, clearly, but if you're beginning to see some traction in your streams then this might be the device you need to take things up a notch.
game.co.uk

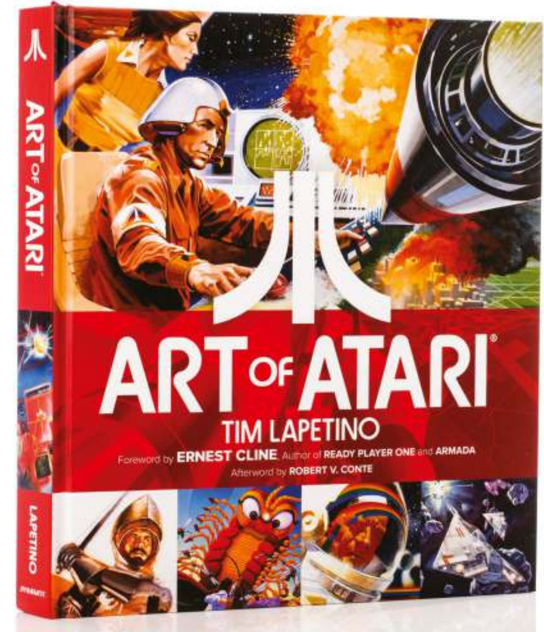





THE ART OF ATARI

PUBLISHER: **DYNAMITE ENTERTAINMENT**



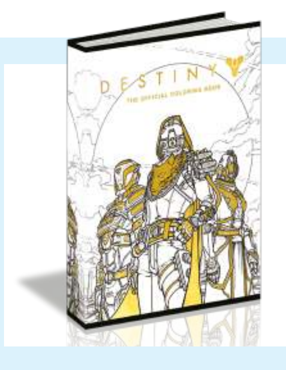
AS GAMING ART books go, we'd say this is just about the best we've ever seen and there are a number of reasons for that. First and foremost it is a beautifully printed collection of the box art and designs from arcade cabinets from Atari's huge collection of titles. The illustrations have been captured at a surprisingly high resolution in both their original form and as photographs of the finished packaging, all of which are printed on an excellent quality of paper. The colours are vibrant and rich, as if they were fresh off the presses.

Second, author Tim Lapetino has done a tremendous job of not only tracking down the names of the original artists to make sure they get proper credit for their work, but also having many of them comment on the pieces they created, offering little snippets of backstory on how or why they chose to interpret the often limited visuals of the games they were portraying in such vivid ways. Getting these first-hand recollections of the time period in which these pieces of art were created is some great added value and it's all laid out on the page very nicely. The artwork shines above all else and the interviews are concise. There are even examples of early concepts and notes about how things were changed before the final version.

Third, we've got some great supplementary material here too, such as profiles on some of the key artists and their work, and some background on particular games. For instance, the infamous *ET* game and the excavation that took place to reveal the buried copies outside New Mexico is chronicled alongside the original art. All told, it's a fantastic celebration of a lost art in the gaming industry.

www.funstockretro.co.uk

VERDICT 10/10



DESTINY: THE OFFICIAL COLORING BOOK

Joining the long list of adult colouring books on the market, *Destiny* offers up some desaturated scenes for your enjoyment. With Hunters, Titans, Warlocks, Ghosts, Fallen and more well represented, every fan of the game should be happy. Where we go from there, however, we don't know, although we'd welcome a *Doom* book so long as it comes packaged with red pens.

www.amazon.co.uk



THE ART OF SPLATOON

Odd to think it's taken this long for a collection of concept art and renders from Nintendo's hit shooter to be brought together, but you can look forward to this compendium in July. What you can expect to see inside are 320 pages of sketches, 3D concept renders, weapon designs, maps, storyboards and more. It's a very fun looking game and the art has always been great.

www.darkhorse.com



FRIGATES OF EVE: THE CROSS SECTIONS

Call us nerds all you like, but we love a good cross section. There's something about being able to look at the inner workings of something that gives you a far greater appreciation of its construction and that's no less the case with fictional ships in a space MMO. This book of frigate renders from *EVE Online* features 28 of the most iconic vessels.

www.darkhorse.com



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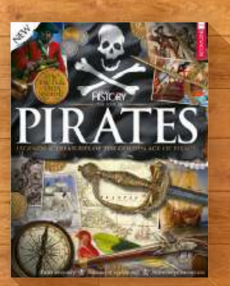
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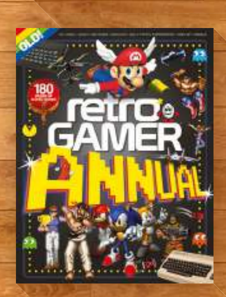






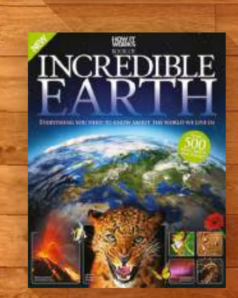


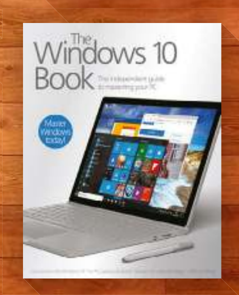








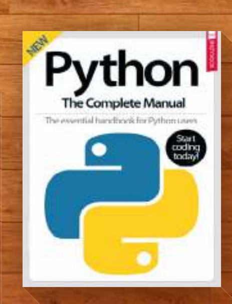


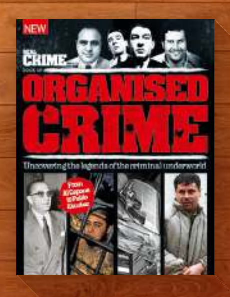


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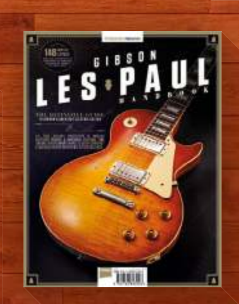
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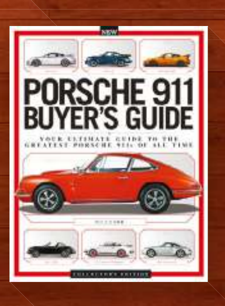


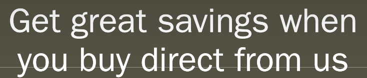










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